

*THE ORDEAL AND TRAGEDY
OF BINKLEY BAPTIST CHURCH*

*By
John L. Humber*

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*Chapel Hill, NC
1992*

This review is an attempt to understand what happened to The Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church during the past year, and is lovingly dedicated to all its members who have lived through this experience.

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INTRODUCTION

During 1991 and 1992 the Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, was guided through what became a highly divisive and rending experience. On the surface it would seem that the issue of homosexuality was the question over which differing opinions created the rift that caused many members to leave. The request for licensure to preach by John Blevins, an openly gay, sexually active ministerial student at Duke University who joined Binkley Church in December, 1990, was the focal point of that issue and the events which followed. However, when one reviews what was said and done during the past year, it becomes abundantly clear that John Blevins and the issue of homosexuality were only the catalyst which brought to the fore a number of other divisive issues.

In the first section that follows is an historical chronology summarizing those events that occurred within Binkley Baptist Church primarily during 1991 and 1992 dealing with the issue of homosexuality as well as other divisive issues, such as Biblical interpretation, ordination, local church autonomy, and political processes within the church. This survey was assembled from Binkley church records and from position statements and letters provided by members expressing their views on the issues and the process over the period. An attempt was made to identify the major actions taken by all sides in the controversy, providing a synopsis of those views expressed for and against the issues as well as the process used to pursue the main question. No attempt was made to summarize any literature on the subject from sources outside of the church, whether or not provided by the leadership or members.

And secondly, a subjective analysis has been placed at the end of this survey, for it is my view that there exists a serious misconception in the minds of many members as well as the general public as to what actually occurred at Binkley over the past year. This analysis is my own evaluation of how and why my Church has been effectively destroyed for me, and, evidently, for a sizable group of other members as well who have either left or are simply fading away. For it now embraces various policies, initiatives and loyalties which are viewed as simply unacceptable.

Perhaps this assessment will help other members as it has me to understand more clearly what they have felt and thought during this very painful experience. Perhaps some lessons taken from our failure as a congregation at Binkley, as a community of faith, may help other congregations and their members elsewhere to face similar challenges more successfully when the need arises.

THE ORDEAL OF BINKLEY CHURCH

1983 - 1990

The subject of homosexuality was never an issue at Binkley Baptist Church, which over the decades accepted anyone into its membership who professed belief in Jesus Christ, regardless of the method by which they were baptized. During the recent controversy one Binkley deacon wrote in a letter to the editor of the *Chapel Hill Herald* (March 19, 1992) that the church "...has deliberately been inclusive of homosexuals in its membership..." He revealed in this statement a limited understanding of what Binkley has stood for during these past thirty four years. In 1983 Robert Seymour preached a sermon sharing what in his view were interpretive fallacies surrounding the Biblical passages used for not openly accepting homosexual persons, pointing out some new scientific thinking about the origins of homosexuality. With this exception, Binkley Church has never made an issue of homosexuality and never called attention to its homosexual members, respecting the privacy they had chosen for themselves. What Binkley Baptist Church has stood for is the deliberate inclusiveness of all Christians who wished to worship there or felt led to join its membership, regardless of the method of Baptism they had experienced or the path which had lead them on their journey of faith to this particular congregation of believers.

The first time the issue of homosexuality arose in a public discussion among the general membership of Binkley Church was when the present Senior Minister, Linda E. Jordan, wrote a statement to the church about herself to assist the membership in considering her being called to the pulpit at Binkley. In this statement, in a section captioned "A Single Experience", she indicated that after several opportunities for marriage and following a marriage annulment twenty years earlier, it was her deliberate choice to live as a single person, citing as a reason self-protection from a painful marital conflict in the midst of which she grew up. In this statement she said:

I feel very fortunate that I have formed a healthy and significant friendship which allowed me to share my home with another person, Emilie. In living with her, I have been able to overcome some of my selfishness and to develop a more positive attitude toward conflict and closeness. With the death of Emilie's sister and our decision to assume responsibility for Emilie's niece, Melissa, I inherited a parenting role which was extremely difficult for me but which has proven to be valuable. Therefore, although I am single, I have had the benefit of stable and loving relationships which have nurtured my self-development immensely.

It is important to me personally that I not be viewed as unfulfilled or less complete because I am single. I consider myself to be whole and wholesome. I enjoy close friendships with both male and female persons and challenge the labels that most single persons confront continually.

It is important to me professionally that I not be expected to be the pastor and her wife [spouse]. Moreover, it is important that my compensation, living space and

personal time be valued and respected in the same manner as that of a married person.

This statement raised a question in the minds of a number of members as to whether Dr. Jordan was homosexual, herself. That question was publicly asked by a member at the Church Conference on March 25, 1990, which was scheduled to decide whether or not to call her as Senior Minister. A woman member of the congregation stood and said that Dr. Jordan had been asked point blank by the Binkley Morning Women's Group: "Are you gay?"; and, according to this member, Dr. Jordan denied that she was, this answer being accepted by the Women's Group. This answer, apparently, also satisfied the members of the church present at the Church Conference, for the issue was not raised again.

The method chosen by the Church Council, and announced by Joe Clontz, Chair of the Pulpit Committee, by which to issue the call was to have Jordan visit in the community for a week, preach on Sunday, meet members at a church conference that night to answer questions, and then wait in another room while the church deliberated and voted on whether to call her as Senior Minister. After two years of time spent by the Pulpit Committee seeking a candidate to present to the Church, it was never adequately answered why a process was established to have the congregation rush to a decision on the same day when many members met the candidate for the first time. No one was given time to go home, talk with friends whose judgment they respected and come to a decision. And, the atmosphere among a large segment of the congregation was one of embarrassment at having to decide with the candidate waiting in the wings. The call was made with only about 16 dissenting votes, and Dr. Jordan moved to Chapel Hill a month or so later.

1991

This year witnessed the beginnings of growing dissatisfaction among some Binkley members with the general direction in which their Church was being led and the priorities which were being emphasized by its leadership.

Senior Minister's First Year Congregational Evaluation

On April 21, 1991, Binkley Church hosted a Conflict Resolution Workshop, but the reasons for such a program were not made clear to the membership. Ostensibly, it was to help people learn to deal with their disagreements involving the Desert Storm military operation. However, it was about this time that a review by the congregation of Linda Jordan's first year as Senior Minister was directed by an Evaluation Committee, and there were divided opinions as to her effectiveness in areas of administration, staff relations and absenteeism. The complete results were not made public, only a general statement of support being released in the *Newsletter* (May 28, 1991):

The information provided by the congregation was quite thorough, very thoughtful and most constructive. It is clear that a vast majority of the church

believes that we are blessed with a gifted human being who serves as our Senior Pastor. The Church has provided Dr. Jordan with many affirmations as well as suggestions for areas in which additional attention is sought.

This only served to deepen questions as to the effectiveness of her leadership among those who had made negative observations. It was not until one year later that, after continuing demands for a full disclosure of that evaluation, a more complete report was published in the *Newsletter* (April 28, 1992). This report revealed to the membership that “the vast majority of the church” referred to in the 1991 report quoted above was comprised of only about 180 responses out of over 500 resident members, and that 75% of those responses gave Dr. Jordan an overall rating of 4.1 on a 1 - 5 scale. The evaluation scale provided for a choice of responses as to her effectiveness and member satisfaction was:

- 1 - not particularly
- 2 - somewhat
- 3 - neutral
- 4 - effective/meaningful/satisfied
- 5 - very effective/meaningful/satisfied

The 1992 amplified report stated that “the anonymously offered comments from the survey form are not a part of this filing [report].” This statement seemed to imply that such comments either had little constructive value and should be discounted, or there were other unidentified reasons why they should not be shared with the membership. However, since only four questions on the survey required use of the rating scale and eleven others required write-in answers, this was not considered by many members to be an adequate report. The entire questionnaire provided for congregational input to be implemented on an anonymous basis. It was assumed by the membership that the leadership did not want respondents identified for that would tend to divide the church into two opposing factions in the minds of the leadership. A laudable purpose!

Blevins Requests Licensure

The next instance when the issue was publicly raised was when John Blevins, who said he had only been a member for three months (*Chapel Hill Herald*, May 17, 1992), requested ordination as a Baptist minister and simultaneously revealed that he was gay. According to Jordan’s interview with the *Chapel Hill Herald* on May 18, 1992, she had been at Binkley only one year when Blevins came to her making this request, simultaneously announcing his homosexuality.

The Diaconate Begins Dealing With The Issue

Blevins joined Binkley Church as a member on December 16, 1990 and, on April 8, 1991, Jordan presented his request for ordination to the Diaconate. However, she only recommended licensure since she said that ordination policy required a candidate to have completed his education before the church ordained him. Blevins was then completing his second year at Duke Divinity School. A motion was passed for the Diaconate Chair

to appoint a committee to meet with Blevins and Anne Marie Marshbanks, another Duke Divinity student requesting licensure who had been active at Binkley for several years and had served one summer as Ministerial Intern. No mention was made in the minutes that Blevins was gay.

The committee, comprised of Alice Cotten, Dick Clifford and Byron McCane, reported back at the Diaconate's June meeting. For some reason at least two of the three members of this committee were not informed that a gay person was requesting licensure when asked to serve on the committee, but learned of this after accepting that responsibility. Byron McCane said that he would have volunteered to serve on the committee anyway had he known because he felt it important to help seminary students proceed with their careers. The other members likely felt the same way.

This committee met with Blevins and reported back on June 3, 1991, recommending, 2 to 1, that the Diaconate proceed with the licensure of both Blevins and Marshbanks. Carol Stevens moved to accept the committee's recommendation to proceed and a lengthy discussion followed during which several points were made regarding:

- *the Church's and the Scriptures' teaching in reference to sexuality.*
- *the need for the church to face this issue at some time.*
- *the congregation nor the diaconate were fully ready (educated) to make this decision at this time.*
- *the need to understand where each of us as individuals stand on this issue to better make a decision as a corporate body.*
- *a request for a list of resources for personal education.*
- *the need to be sensitive to all members of the congregation - those who may agree or may not agree with the licensure recommendation.*

It was at this juncture that McCane said he began to realize he was facing what he called "a stacked deck." He said he had the distinct impression that the end result of this issue was a foregone conclusion and any opposition views were simply invited as a formality. He was invited to speak opposite Bob Bratcher on this issue and declined, feeling as if he were "being set up to be a fall guy." It was about this time he left Binkley when a ministerial position was offered him. However, he did write a statement on his views which will be considered below opposite Bratcher's statement.

After this discussion, Carol Stevens withdrew her motion to proceed with Blevins' licensure. The committee was expanded to add Lyman Ferrell and Carol Stevens due to the pending retirement of the original committee members from the Diaconate. After some discussion the committee was instructed to meet with the Senior Minister and Associate Minister to discuss issues of homosexuality, the issue as it related to Blevins and to recommend a process to follow "in bringing licensure to the congregation and educational issues that might be necessary." Meanwhile, plans were made and the Church proceeded with the licensure of Anne Marie Marshbanks which was accomplished in a routine manner.

Opposing Points Of View

Two deacons prepared papers expressing their opposing points of view on the issue of the ordination of homosexuals. Robert Bratcher's statement, 21 June 1991, listed major passages from the Old Testament, which he referred to only as the Jewish Torah, and Paul's writings in the New Testament that infer or deal directly with homosexuality. Bratcher asked:

Are we, as followers of Christ and members of a Christian community, bound by the teachings of the Jewish Law and the writings of Paul to regard homosexual behavior as abominable and depraved? Not necessarily -- no more than we elevate Paul's views on women, or divorce or slavery, to the level of Christian absolutes. We are not ruled by the Jewish Torah nor are we compelled to think as Paul thought, or to act as he did. In the light of his Jewish training and of the conditions in the world in which he lived we can understand his abhorrence of homosexual practices, and we can believe he did the right thing, in his time, in writing as he did. But that does not mean we assume that his viewpoint on this or any other matter is automatically binding on us.

Bratcher went on to state that "It is widely agreed that homosexuals, by and large, are born, not made (the old argument nature vs nurture)," recognizing, however, that:

many hold that a boy's early training, especially the kind of parent(s) he has, may be an important, if not the decisive factor in his being a homosexual. But a child (boy or girl) who is born a homosexual has no more responsibility for being homosexual than one who is born and grows up heterosexual. It is a given. Do we consider homosexuality a perversion, one that brands at least 10% of the population as morally deformed?

He added that in the community of faith, we welcome all who wish to follow Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; and then asked, if a person who is baptized is considered a full member of the community of faith, is that person considered a second class member because he or she is a homosexual?

That is unthinkable. There can be no restrictions on that person's service in the community, in response to the Lord's call. A homosexual who is called to ministry is as valid a candidate for license and ordination as a heterosexual. There can be no distinction. If a church judges that a homosexual is not qualified to be an ordained minister, logic demands that such a person is not qualified to hold any office or perform any service in the church. Which means such a person is not qualified to be a member of the church.

He concluded that there should be no double standard for homosexuals or heterosexuals with regard to being faithful to their partners, condemning promiscuity

and adultery. Under such conditions, he said:

... we have no right to deny them their request to be licensed and/or ordained to Christian service. After all, ordination does not mean being elevated to a higher rank or class of Christians: it means the church's recognition and endorsement of that person's response to God's call to a definite service, a particular ministry. If God chooses to call that person to ministry, who are we to set ourselves against what God has done?

In expressing an opposing point of view, Byron McCane, began by observing that Biblical scholars agree the Bible condemns homosexual behavior as sin. Several years ago a number of authors (Scanzoni and Mollenkott, Boswell, Scroggs) tried to argue that the Bible did not condemn homosexuality as sin, but these authors, he added, were not trained Biblical scholars and their works contained many serious errors. It is now clear, McCane said, that "both the Old Testament (Leviticus 18:23, et. al.) and the New Testament (Romans 1:26 et.al.) identify homosexual behavior as a sin against God (Cranfield, Kaseman, Hays)."

Must we, too, condemn homosexual behavior? Not necessarily; after all, there are many things in the Bible which are no longer binding, such as dietary laws, circumcision, and rules which keep women silent in church. We Baptists take the Bible as our guide for matters of faith and practice, and reserve the right (and responsibility) to interpret it for ourselves. Accordingly, we can thoughtfully evaluate the pros and cons of ordination for homosexuals.

Arguments against the ordination of homosexuals are largely based on the Bible, which speaks with a single voice on this subject. Every time homosexuality is mentioned in the Bible, it is condemned, sometimes in very strong terms, and the Bible never says anything positive about it. ... Because the Bible so strongly condemns homosexuality, proponents of gay rights sometimes criticize it as 'homophobic' or 'heterosexist' or 'patriarchal'. These loaded terms express a frustration with the Bible which is understandable, but they do not help us understand it. The Bible condemns homosexuality simply because of the doctrine of creation (Genesis 1-3), which says that God created male and female. ... the Bible views homosexual behavior as a distortion of God's design. From a Biblical point of view, homosexual activity is similar to a pollution of the environment: it is an activity whereby humans mar the beauty of God's created order. Although the Bible's perspective on homosexuality may be offensive to some of our modern sensibilities, it should at least be understood for what it is: an ethical application of the doctrine of creation.

Referring to the emphasis of recent arguments in favor of a scientific basis for homosexuality and the need for the church to be inclusive, McCane pointed out that no

definitive studies have irrefutably established the existence of genetic factors in determining homosexuality. But, he added, that it is increasingly evident that homosexual orientation is acquired early in life. The conclusion made that homosexual tendencies are virtually innate, and thus may not be morally bad, does not consider that some innate tendencies are not good. Some, like alcoholism, are quite bad and thus this argument is specious and does not resolve the ethical and theological problems. As sinful persons we should expect that innate desires do exist in this sinful world that are not pleasing to God.

McCane addressed the idea of inclusivity by reminding us that:

... a central message of the Bible -- and of Jesus in particular -- is that all people are welcome in God's family. How can we, who have received God's grace in Christ deny it to others? Does not God accept us all just the way we are? Certainly we believe that, yet perhaps it is time for us to put inclusiveness in its proper place. ... Surely God does accept us as we are, but the fact is that there is something wrong with the way we are. The Bible calls it sin, and that is why it is grace for God to accept us: we do not deserve it, the way we are. Inclusiveness is not, and never has been, the Gospel of Christ; it is simply an ideal currently in vogue among a certain set of white liberals. Inclusiveness is, it seems to me, an idol of our culture which is in danger of becoming an idol of the church. The Gospel by contrast, has always included a call to repentance of sin.

In closing, concluding that Blevins does have the gifts and calling to ministry, McCane said that he could not support his licensure because it would affirm, celebrate and legitimize homosexuality which he believes is sinful. He recalled the story of Jesus confronting the woman who had committed adultery (John 8:1-11). Jesus did not condemn the woman, McCane reminded us, but neither did He act as if she had not sinned. Jesus told her: "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." (John 8:11)

The Diaconate Begins the Process

At the Church Council meeting on June 17, 1991, Grace Wagoner, Chair of the Worship Committee, presented the new Wedding Guide policy statement formulated by a special committee of which Blevins, Jordan and Wagoner were members. Jordan and Wagoner both confirmed Blevins' comment made at the last meeting that the committee should consider writing a document for a gay union, because he would most likely want to use it at some point in time. This comment was passed around by word of mouth, but was not made generally known to the membership. Had this fact not been withheld from public knowledge, it would have given the congregation some clearer idea of what the future held.

At the annual Diaconate retreat, held on July 6, 1991, the Chairman, Jim Wells, announced that the Lindsays and the Eastmans would lead a Church School class that Fall on Adult Sexuality And Our Faith, along with a possible series of sermons on

sexuality by Linda Jordan and a film series on *Changing Values In A Changing World*. The Eastmans are associated with Jim and Elizabeth Wells in a joint psychiatric and counseling service called The Center For Creative Balance involving therapeutic counseling for homosexual as well as other persons.

Carol Stevens reported for the Blevins Licensure committee, including thoughts on the timeliness of the issue for the Fall, how deacons should be involved, and ideas for the education of the deacons and the congregation. Lyman Ferrell would develop a resource list appropriate for reference.

The committee recommended that Blevins be told that Binkley is not ready to act on his request. Further discussion on the "education process for the congregation and the diaconate" yielded a plan for the study of adult sexuality for the Fall and Spring. Various points of view were expressed:

1. Sexual preference and practice is a private matter and not an issue for our consideration.
2. The Bible condemns homosexuality as a sin and makes anyone intending to practice homosexuality ineligible for the ministry, not because they are sinners, as are we all, but because they intend to persist in the behavior perceived as sinful.
3. Sexuality is between us and God and if it is to be judged, it is for God to judge and not our neighbor.
4. We need to be concerned about role models for our children.
5. What if someone is homosexually oriented because they have been programmed to be that way from birth and early life experiences - don't they need good role models too?
6. When it comes to sexuality, are the more crucial questions really those concerning love, monogamy, respect, mutuality, and faithfulness rather than sexual orientation?

Recommendations from the committee were accepted to:

1. Begin a careful inquiry into the varying theological perspectives on homosexuality and the impact these perspectives may have on our decision concerning John.
2. Spend more time getting to know John as we have Anne Marie.
3. Know what the Bible actually says about homosexuality.
4. How to make decisions consistent with Christ's love when faced with apparent directions from Paul to avoid a number of things, including women in church leadership as well as homosexuality.

Lyman Ferrell was asked to write a letter for the *Newsletter* to inform the congregation about the concerns of the diaconate and the decisions with which it is dealing. The letter "would be taken to Blevins for his review." Jordan asked that summaries of the council and deacon meetings be written for the newsletter.

It was at this time that Bill Hoyle announced to the Diaconate his resignation as Binkley's Associate Minister and his plans to take a position with the VEFC (Volunteer Emergency Family Care) of North Carolina in Raleigh.

The Educational Process Proposed

Jim Wells gave the Council a report at its July 16th meeting on the upcoming *Newsletter* item:

1. There will be a class offered in the Fall entitled "With Integrity of Heart - Living Values In Changing Times."
2. The series is based on Sexuality & Spirituality.
3. We ask that you speak to your deacons concerning these issues and any concerns you may have.

Jordan said the Fall series would begin Oct 13 and end Nov 17, being held on Sunday evenings 5:30 to 7:00 with a light meal afterwards. Four or five group meetings were planned. The Council passed Wells' motion to approve the "Fall educational series" by voice vote.

Jim Wells reported that the diaconate was unanimous "in wanting to appoint" an interim associate minister "with the selection being made immediately," although this was not reflected in the diaconate minutes in July or September and no meeting was held in August. No search committee was necessary if the appointment did not exceed 6 months. Wells moved that such a person be appointed without delay and brought before the Council for approval. Carol Stevens suggested letting the Senior Minister make the selection for the Interim Associate Minister with the help of various committees.

The letter to the congregation from the Diaconate chair, Jim Wells, as published in the *Newsletter* (July 23, 1991) stated:

Your Diaconate and Ministers have recently been engaged in discussions related to several social and ethical concerns which affect us all. The discord among other Christian bodies concerning human sexuality, teenage pregnancies and sexuality, terminations of pregnancies, increasing numbers of divorces, marital conflict, single adult sexuality, AIDS, and heterosexual and homosexual conflicts as well as other issues have been topics of discussion in our recent meetings.

The recent request for licensing to preach the Gospel from John Blevins, a divinity school student who is gay, has also helped us to focus on many timely questions.

As a result of our deliberations, we are planning the following process to enable all of us to think through these issues in the context of our church community:

1. *An adult church school class on Sexuality and Spirituality, led by Caroline and Paul Lindsay and Bill and Judy Eastman, will be offered at Binkley this fall.*
2. *A series of Sunday evening programs entitled 'With Integrity of Heart: Living Values in Changing Times' will be held from October 13 through November 17.*

3. *The Diaconate will be inviting to our meetings people with special expertise in theology as it relates to these areas of concern. We are also establishing a list of readings, to be available in the church library, which we believe may be helpful in our corporate learning process.*

Please speak to your deacon if you have comments or questions concerning this process. Everyone's involvement is encouraged.

Dr. Jordan reported to the Council at its August 12th meeting that she and Bill Hoyle had interviewed four candidates for the Interim Associate Minister position. The interviews had taken about 45 minutes each and she was recommending Steven Hoogerwerf. Hoogerwerf's degree was in Christian Ethics and he would be defending his dissertation through December at Duke. He would not be a candidate for the permanent position. His appointment as Interim Associate Minister was approved by a voice vote of the council and announced in the *Newsletter* of August 27th to the congregation, giving his background, educational achievements and experience.

It appears from the minutes that neither the Council nor the Diaconate were informed of Hoogerwerf's experience and involvement in homosexual counseling, including the fact stated in his resume that he served as National Director of the Task Force on Homosexuality for the Reformed Church of America. However, several Council members recalled that Jordan did inform the Council of Hoogerwerf's experience in counseling gays and remarked on how fortunate the Church was to have him. She said that he would be of valuable assistance in "helping us to ease through this difficult period of transition." Jordan also did inform the Council of his position with the Reformed Church Task Force, but his resume was not made public. It was not until 29 December 1991, the Sunday John Blevins was asked to preach, that it was announced to the membership in the Sunday Bulletin that Hoogerwerf was the National Director of that Homosexual Task Force, a fact that came as some surprise for many members. The Moderator, in answer to a question at a later time about why this information was withheld when Hoogerwerf was introduced to the congregation, said that it was not thought to be relevant to the job for which Hoogerwerf was hired, namely to work with the youth ministry. From all reports, however, that was a job that Hoogerwerf did perform in an outstanding manner.

"The Process" Begins

In September the Diaconate began having a series of speakers to talk with them on the subject of homosexuality. On September 3, 1991, Furman Hewitt, a former professor at Southeastern Baptist Seminary and a member of Binkley Church, spoke to the Diaconate and Jim Wells reported a summary of Hewitt's remarks in the Diaconate minutes, indicating that Hewitt believed neither the New or Old Testament addressed homosexual orientation [as opposed to homosexual behavior].

The Diaconate learned that in Hewitt's view there are few references in the Bible to homosexual behavior and none to homosexual orientation. Those that do exist deal with

homosexual rape, an aggressive, utterly disrespectful and unloving behavior. He suggested that we really need to address what is meant by homosexual practice, since whether considering homosexual or heterosexual behavior, there is a vast difference between sexuality in a committed love relationship and compulsive sexuality practiced promiscuously.

On September 8, a meeting of the charter members of Binkley Church was held at Grace and Leo Wagoner's home with Linda Jordan to discuss the licensure issue. She was advised to go slowly in pursuing the issue since serious theological problems were being raised, such as: the difference between sexual orientation and practice, committed relationships and promiscuity, the function of the clergy as a role model in a community of faith, the interpretation of scriptural passages related to homosexuality. There was a difference of opinion expressed as to what licensure entailed and whether it carried with it the authority to perform marriages. Linda Jordan also announced her intent to deliver a series of sermons on the issue of Sexuality. No one tried to prevent her delivering such sermons, although it was suggested that she delay them for a while. Virtually no support for the issue was voiced to the Senior Minister by those present and members left feeling quite disturbed over the course of action projected for the next several months by the church leadership.

At its meeting on September 16, the Council agreed to a joint statement with the Diaconate to be placed in the *Newsletter* the next day (September 17, 1991), proposing a series of steps which people should use in dealing with differences of opinion. This statement, signed by the Chair of the Diaconate (Wells) and the Church Moderator (Helwig) said:

This year, our church has dealt with conflict on many levels, from our weekly discussions on the Gulf War to the Conflict Resolution Workshop held here in April. In a church family, like in any family, there will be disagreements about how to do one thing or another. We almost certainly will disagree from time to time about how we think or feel about one issue or another. This is part of living our lives together. Often we will find that if we respectfully talk with one another about our concerns, our differences will not have been as great as they initially seemed. At the very least, respectfully talking with one another about our differences will allow for more understanding of each other's perspectives.

We in the diaconate and Church Council, your elected representatives, wish to propose the following approach to dealing with differences of opinion or concerns about how something at Binkley is being done or, perhaps, not being done:

- 1) We can take our concerns directly to the person with whom we disagree. This is usually the very best first step and will usually be all that is necessary.*
- 2) We can ask our deacon to meet with us and the person with whom we disagree and their deacon, and the four of us can try to work out the differences. This will almost always allow for a satisfactory resolution.*
- 3) If we have met individually and/or with our deacons and this has not been*

enough to allow us to feel sufficient resolution, then we can bring our concerns to either the Diaconate or the Church Council, depending upon the nature of the issues.

- 4) *If the Diaconate or the Church Council cannot adequately work out a resolution, then the matter can be taken to a quarterly Congregational Meeting.*

Following these steps should allow for the greatest peace and harmony within our fellowship. Carrying our concerns to others without involving the person or persons with whom we differ will cause everyone unnecessary pain -- and without resolution of our differences.

The nature of the conflicts arising within the congregation prompting the issue of such a document was never mentioned publicly, which left the majority of those without additional involvement in the church beyond attending Sunday worship service wondering what was going on. Many times during the Fall members approached other members asking "What is going on at the Church?" It was obviously not the Gulf War in the Fall of 1991.

In the same *Newsletter* Linda Jordan announced a series of four sermons on Spirituality and Sexuality. Citing the subject of sexuality as being forbidden in her religious upbringing, she stated:

It [sexuality] is at the very least intensely volatile because it is so personal. However, it is my conviction that the church has been too silent and too ashamed of the gift of sexuality for too long. I am actually heartened that so many church bodies are now addressing this most relevant issue of both society and faith. Moreover, I am proud of the fact that Binkley has always nurtured an atmosphere of openness and a willingness to engage in controversial issues.

I do not presume in any of these sermons to have an authoritative or final word on this most complex subject. It is my hope and my prayer that I can frame for us the right questions and express for us Biblical considerations which can be helpful in our dialogue.

After much study, struggle and devotion, I offer these to you:

September 22 *'Sexuality and Spirituality: Can the Two Become one? (An Incarnational Theology)*

September 29 *'Eros As it Should Be' (A Biblical Sexual Ethic)*

October 6 *'The Language of Love' (Moving Toward Intimacy)*

October 13 *'Who Is My Neighbor?' (The Story of Bruce)*

The Director of Christian Education, Gretchen Jordan, simultaneously announced the Fall Sunday night study series entitled "Living Values, Changing Times."

In an age when we enjoy multiple choices but feel powerless, want what is new but fear the future, or long for roots but find old time religion deficient, this six weeks study series will offer a welcome chance to reground ourselves in a Biblical heritage.

Wide-ranging discussions in small group settings will encourage participants to examine their Christian values in a complex world and discover new insights for living.

Small group facilitators announced were Dot Cansler, William Sims, Carol Stevens and Jim Wilde. The text was *With Integrity of Heart*.

Meanwhile books were finding their way into the library. In the October 1st Newsletter six books on the issue were announced by the Librarian as now being made available, three of which were given by Ron Knight, one of Binkley's openly homosexual members: *Ex-Gays? There are None!*; *Good News For Modern Gays*; *But Lord, They're Gay*; *Another Kind Of Love* (Woods); *Living In Sin?* (Spong); and *The Ethics Of Sex* (Thielicke).

A report from the Diaconate Chair at the Church Conference held on October 6, 1991, stated that Ann Marie Marshbanks and John Blevins differed in their separate requests for licensure in that "... John wished it known to us that with regard to sexual preference he has a homosexual orientation." The committee appointed to examine them, consisting of Alice Cotten, Byron McCane and Dick Clifford, approved Anne Marie, but as to Blevins, felt the Diaconate should "carefully consider what part, if any, his sexual orientation should play in our eventual decision to bring or not to bring his name forward to the congregation recommending licensure." The committee, now comprised of Lyman Ferrell, Carol Stevens and Tom Fewel, was asked to bring further recommendations on how to proceed. Jim Wells reviewed the points discussed at the July Diaconate retreat and the recommendations from the licensure committee at the Church Conference.

Subsequently, Wells continued, the church supported a series of Sunday night programs entitled Living Values/Changing Times and an adult church school class on sexuality in general, including homosexuality, which essentially asked how the church can be a caring community for people with varying circumstances and life experiences. Lyman Ferrell was charged with "putting together a bibliography of materials that look at all sides" of the issue which would be available in the library. Furman Hewitt, who has written extensively on these questions, had spoken to the Diaconate and others will be heard. Wells said:

We encourage all members of the congregation who are interested to read the materials placed in the library, to participate in the class on Sexuality and Spirituality, to participate in the Sunday evening programs called Living Values/Changing Times, to attend Diaconate meetings when theologians are to speak, and to share your perspectives with your deacon or with me either in

person or in writing. At some point after the first of the year, we will make a decision about what to recommend to the Congregation concerning John's request.

"I don't want to discuss the issue of homosexuality tonight (there will be time for that later)," Wells said, but he invited comments and suggestions regarding the process chosen.

During the ensuing discussion at that October 6th Church Conference, the following additional points were made:

1. Information is available in the Library and other materials will be added.
2. Tapes of future presentations will be available in the library and can be copied.
3. Congregational members might like to attend meetings when presentations are being made.
4. "Licensure, typically is done during theological training, is a step toward ordination and is a way a home church (or one near the School of Divinity) has of saying to the individual that they support him/her and recognize his/her gifts. Licensure is recognized in both the SBC and ABC. A person who is licensed could not perform weddings, but could perform some other functions, such as funerals, for example."
5. "Although Binkley has procedures for ordination, we need clear guidelines for both licensure and ordination. For instance, on what things should the committee check? If we ask the right questions on sexuality of one, should we ask all? What is the right question relating to sexuality to ask?"
6. "It perhaps would be helpful in this procedure to talk to those with a homosexual orientation."
7. The Diaconate hopes to bring a recommendation to the church after the first of the year regarding John's request.

The next night, October 7, at the monthly Diaconate meeting, Wells reported that he had made the above report for the Council at the Church Conference. Future plans discussed included small group meetings, taping of speakers such as Hewitt, panels of Biblical scholars to address congregation, sharing of life by gay persons growing up in the church. Further speakers recommended were Dale Martin and Richard Hays from Duke, recommended by Jordan, and Mahan Siler from Pullen for the next meeting. A folder of articles was placed in the church library. A *Newsletter* article to tell the congregation about the folder and solicit statements would be written by Jim Wells.

The opinion was expressed that Blevins should be answered by the first of the year, but there was nothing to hold the Church to that. Jordan reminded the diaconate that Blevins would graduate in June and we "need to move in good faith."

Another conflict resolution conference and workshop was announced in the *Newsletter* on October 8, to be held at North Carolina Central University, and the Senior Minister published the following rating scale for sermons which she had copied from the Religious News Service, this after her first three sermons on Sexuality and Spirituality:

G ---Generally acceptable to everyone. Full of inoffensive platitudes; usually

described as 'wonderful' or 'marvelous'.

PG --For more mature congregations. At times this sermon makes the Gospel relevant to today's issues; may even contain mild suggestions for change. Often described as 'challenging' or 'thought-provoking,' even though no one intends to take any action to change any attitudes.

R ---Definitely restricted to those not upset by the truth. This sermon 'tells it like it is'. Threatening to the comfortable; most often described as 'disturbing' or 'controversial'; usually indicates that the preacher has an outside source of income.

X ---Positively limited to those who can handle explosive ideas. This sermon really 'socks it to 'em'. It is the kind of sermon that landed Jeremiah in the well, got Amos run out of town, set things up for the stoning of Stephen; always described as 'shocking' or 'in poor taste'. The minister who preaches this sermon had better have her/his suitcase packed and her/his life insurance paid up.

The next speaker invited by the Diaconate was Mahan Siler, Pastor of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, which was considering the request for a gay union from two homosexual men. He spoke on "Homosexuality And The Church" November 4 and the congregation was invited to hear him.

Later in November Martha Henderson placed in the church library some sermons from a series given some years ago at Riverside Church in New York on sexuality along with a "corporate church statement regarding inclusion of gay and lesbian persons in the church."

At the December 2nd Diaconate meeting it was agreed that "we need an additional speaker to represent another point of view than expressed by previous speakers." The chair would try to set up a session with Richard Hays. However, when Hays was invited by Hoogerwerf to speak, he declined because he did not wish to be overly identified with this issue. His main theological interest is in the theological study and interpretation of the Pauline Letters, not specifically Paul's view on homosexuality, even though his article has emerged in the minds of many theologians as the definitive position against homosexuality from a Biblical perspective.

John Blevins delivered a sermon at the worship service on 29 December, entitled "Who's In Charge Here?." He said that "Binkley lived out the true message of faith in its early years and has done so - though I'm sure not perfectly - in the years since. But we must keep these questions ever in front of us. 'What in the world do we think we are doing?' 'Who's in charge here?' We must take care that the ground, the touchstone, for our action comes from our response to God's call and not from a social, political agenda." For Binkley to discern God's authority for its actions, he suggested three criteria: Scripture, experience and community.

With regard to the Bible, Blevins said: "As Psalm 119 says, it is a lamp that guides our steps and illumines our way, never providing an all-consuming final light. . . ." He recalled Jeremiah writing about the time "when God would put the law within us and write it on our hearts." He concluded that: "As we wrestle with how to respond to

lesbians and gay men, we must listen not only to the 'law' of the Scripture written on the printed pages of Roman 1, but also to the new covenant that is written in our hearts." As to experience, he said: "Many would argue that this is the second of our Baptist hallmarks: the freedom of each person to work out under the Holy Spirit's guidance their understanding of faith and their relationship to God." He referred to Philip's baptism of the eunuch in violation of the Old Testament law because the eunuch had experienced a new covenant God had written on his heart. With reference to community, Blevins asked: "How do we know when to look at part of the printed Scripture and see it as time bound and culturally conditioned to the degree that the true faith response means looking beyond what it says to the whole of the Bible? We can only know as we listen to one another."

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Jim Wells prepared a summary of some of the documents placed in the Church Library and passed them out at the January 6th Diaconate meeting, copies of which he also provided for the congregation in the narthex. The cover letter introducing these materials stated:

There is mounting evidence that sexual orientation is often, if not nearly always, determined before birth rather than as a learned response to a dysfunctional family system. If this is true, then how do we as a congregation respond to those of us who are homosexually oriented? Are those of us who are gay or lesbian rejected entirely, expected to change our probably inborn sexual orientation, accepted begrudgingly, or lovingly embraced as children of God who have much to offer those of us who are heterosexual as vice versa? If we are embraced as brothers and sisters in Christ, are we expected to live a sexually celibate life, or are we asked to express our sexuality with a same-sex partner in the same loving, life affirming ways that we espouse for heterosexuals. If we are accepted without reservations, are we as a homosexually-oriented person prohibited from answering a call to the Christian ministry because of fear we will be a bad role model for our children, or are we welcomed as an opportunity to provide a loving role model for our children who have been or will be born with a homosexual orientation? When asking these questions, does the Bible provide us with clear and absolute answers, or is it a guide which requires prayerful discernment in the light of modern understandings?

For some of us these questions are easily answered and for others of us there is a profound struggle to know what is right, what is consistent with God's will for us. As a congregation we are faced with trying to discern the correct path for this fellowship of believers. What we decide will have an effect on each of us, and there will be effects which are likely to extend far beyond our own community.

Your Diaconate has been trying to provide leadership in this process of discernment over the past several months. As a part of the process, a packet of pertinent materials has been assembled and placed in the church library. Many of you have probably already taken the time to carefully study these materials. Others have probably wanted to but simply have not had the time. It is for this latter group that I have put together this abbreviated packet of articles. I have attempted to select articles which express the full gamut of opinions on the subject. There are, however, many more articles and books in the library.

It is my hope and prayer that together we can discern God's will for us as we answer these important questions now before us.

The articles included were:

Are Some People Born Gay? Genetic Theory Supported By A Study of Twins by Michael Bailey & Richard Pillard.

Can Homosexuals Change? by Letha Dawson Lawrence - The Other Side, Jan 1984.

The Church And Homosexuality, a sermon by Dr. Robert E. Seymour, Feb. 20, 1983.

On The Ordination Of Homosexuals by Robert Bratcher, Jan 21, 1991.

On The Ordination Of Homosexuals by Byron McCane.

Awaiting The redemption Of Our Bodies by Richard B Hays in Sojourners, 18 Jul 1991.

Resolutions passed on homosexuality in 1976 and 1977 by the SBC.

When the Diaconate was informed that Richard Hays declined an invitation to speak to it, Binkley's Associate Minister, Steve Hoogerwerf, presented Hays' views on the issue of homosexuality to the Diaconate as well as opposing views. The paper he provided on this presentation balanced opposing perspectives, a very scholarly paper. However, some deacons felt the main thrust was on the supportive side of the issue and did not adequately deal with the opposing point of view. Byron McCane said he felt it was extremely significant that Binkley Church did not obtain any speakers to present opposing views to the licensure issue. From his experience on the Diaconate it was his perception that anyone who might have spoken in opposition to the issue did not wish to waste their time on a foregone conclusion.

It was announced that Blevins would appear before the Diaconate on January 21st to make a statement and "answer questions that deacons or other members of the congregation may have concerning his request for licensure and his sexual preference."

Spontaneous questions will certainly be in order on Monday evening, but any questions that can be posed to John in advance, in writing, will allow him the opportunity to think about his answers ahead of time. Written questions may be

submitted either directly to John or to me [Jim Wells] anytime prior to Monday evening.

Blevins was accompanied to that meeting by Keith Hartman, another Duke student. Hartman who wrote articles reporting on that meeting in the *Front Page* (10 April 1992), a newspaper serving gays and lesbians in the Carolinas, and in the *Duke Chronicle* (April 16 and 23, 1992), the daily campus newspaper at Duke University. At that same meeting of the Diaconate, Wells also shared with those present the Pullen Church's document on homosexual union.

The Diaconate Votes

The next Diaconate meeting was on February 3 and it was agreed by the Diaconate that the process would continue and the congregation would make its decision before responding to the press for statements. Tom Fewel moved to recommend approval of Blevins' licensure to the congregation. Jerry Van Sant seconded, and the vote was 15 yes, 7 no, 1 abstention and 4 absentees.

The result of the vote would be reported in the church *Newsletter* and the matter would go to the Council for the scheduling of a congregational vote. Deacons would contact their group members and ask what they needed to be ready to vote on the issue. A recommendation was made that the Council support "educational experiences for the congregation if that is a need expressed by the congregation."

Plans To Actively Involve The Membership Are Now Made

On February 4, 1992, an announcement by Jim Wells of the Diaconate's vote to recommend the approval and acceptance of John Blevins' request for licensure was in the *Newsletter*. The vote was 15 yes, 7 no, 1 abstention with no mention of the 4 absentees. Deacons would be getting in touch with their assigned members to ask their input into the process to be followed as the issue is brought to the congregation for a vote. "We want to hear what you need in the way of information or discussion prior to a congregational meeting which the church council will schedule."

On February 5, 1992, an article in the *News And Observer* published the vote of the Diaconate and included numerous factual errors in its reporting. Unfortunately, some person present at the Diaconate's meeting reported to the press, or to others who informed the press, not only what the vote was, but also who voted for and against the issue. One reporter called a deacon and asked him why he voted against licensure.

A Fact Sheet was prepared and released to the press to correct misinformation on February 7, and to the church membership on February 18 through the *Newsletter*, summarizing the events to this point. It announced the vote of the diaconate to recommend licensure to the Church Conference, stated what licensure meant, indicating that now the question was squarely in the hands of the congregation. The church leaders were asking members what kind of preparation they needed to make the decision. No date was set for the vote. In this Fact Sheet it was stated:

This request for licensure was considered very carefully by Binkley's diaconate, since Mr. Blevins disclosed, in making his request, that he is homosexual. As a result of his admission, and in addition to considering Mr. Blevins' gifts for ministry, the deacons provided opportunities for themselves and for members of the congregation to spend several months reading, listening to speakers, and discussing both the morality of homosexuality and its bearing on licensure. The deacons' vote to recommend licensure to the congregation indicates that the majority of deacons did not consider Mr. Blevins' sexual orientation to be a sufficient barrier to licensure.

The *Chapel Hill Herald* (10 February 1992) ran an article on David Price's previously scheduled sermon at Binkley on 9 February wherein he challenged the membership to harness selfish interests for the common good of the community, reminding them that we tend to forget we are dependent upon one another and often support laws that limit the rights of minorities. Later in the service, Linda Jordan interpreted this message to the congregation as supportive of the homosexual issue facing the church. The article quoted her to say, "I hope we will truly practice David's sermon this morning to really deal honestly and directly and lovingly with this very difficult issue before this congregation."

Jordan's remarks were considered by many members to have been unfortunate and ill advised on her part, for Price never referred to the homosexual issue in his sermon and her remarks had the effect of publicly volunteering him, the local congressman, to take a public stand in favor of this controversial issue when he had not taken one.

In response to the Deacons request for input from members, John Humber provided a statement on February 10, 1992, which essentially upheld the right of all individuals to make a choice of their own lifestyle and a right to live it in the privacy of their own homes as long as it did not negatively impact the health, welfare or right of choice of someone else. Regardless of any individual characteristics over which people may or may not have control or of influences which may permeate their thinking, any behavior or action that people take are the direct result of a personal decision to act, whether consciously or unconsciously, whether understood in all its ramifications or not. He stated that the manner in which one chose to conduct oneself within the bounds of such privacy was a matter of conscience between one's self and one's God, adding that we should not judge others for those things about which we know nothing.

However, it is quite a different thing, Humber said, to be asked to sanction the choice of others simply because they have the right to choose. Disagreement as to such personal choices do not constitute discrimination, but are simply a matter of differences of opinion and belief. He continued that if persons demand their privacy, that should be respected. However, if they reveal their choice of lifestyle in order to gain approval from a group, they must be prepared to accept the judgment which they are, in fact, seeking, whether it results in approval or disapproval. The candidate for office has no right to claim discrimination simply because the majority of the group does not wish to wear the label of his or her preferences.

Therefore, in order to deal with Blevins' request for licensure, Humber concluded that Binkley Church had to determine first of all what its beliefs were on the issue of sexuality. It needed to formulate a statement of policy and belief indicating its relative place in the public forum and the private sector, and its validity in the acceptance of members in the church as well as the selection of leaders in the community of faith. This should be done before any decision is made on any individual request. He offered a statement of policy as a starting point for discussion of this issue.

Polarity of Beliefs and Views Unreconciled

One of the first expressions of dissatisfaction with the process followed was verbalized in a letter dated February 15, 1992, to Linda Jordan, the Diaconate and others by Richard Jenkins, a member who taught a Church School class in the Fall of 1991 on our Baptist Heritage. He resigned all positions of service and membership at Binkley because he felt:

... so frustrated, betrayed and deceived by leadership's handling of John Blevins' licensure that I cannot continue as a member. The open process of discovery I had hoped for instead has been a carefully orchestrated campaign by some of the church leadership to force this candidate upon the church.

He continued, charging that the church school class on sexuality in the Fall was "designed to desensitize church members to alternative sexualities," and that as a member of the Adult Education Committee long before the Fall class began, he was never consulted about this class being added to the curriculum.

Jenkins saw Jordan's sermon series on sexuality as an abuse of her position of power, for as she "forcefully presented the sexual ethic which supports John's licensure . . .," she "presented the opposing position only to show how unchristian it was and there was no other voice from the pulpit on this issue than hers." He felt betrayed by the Diaconate who never heard from any expert opposing licensure or homosexuality. He charged that "the deacons' sessions on this issue have been carefully scheduled and formatted to minimize public input." He saw the Chair of the Diaconate as carefully managing the process to insure a favorable outcome. He cited as an example the meeting at which Blevins appeared before the deacons to answer questions. Jenkins said:

The chair structured the sessions to minimize questions from the floor; he had questions submitted in advance so John could prepare his answers carefully. This format reduced the session to a two hour monologue by John on why he should be licensed. When John dismissed an important question relating to pastoral care, the chair explained the question to him and coached him as to the appropriate answer. The chair influenced the session further by introducing a document by Pullen's pastor in favor of homosexual union. The chair even misrepresented the vote of the ordination [licensure] committee. He described their recommendation of John as 'unanimous'. It was not unanimous; I know the

deacon who cast the dissenting vote.

The process leads me to believe that the church is using John, as John is using the church, to make a statement about homosexuality. . . . This is troublingly apparent in the press coverage. The deacons' vote made the front page of local newspapers before I received my church newsletter informing me of it.

At a later date it was learned from the State Baptist Convention that a *News and Observer* reporter called and asked for a statement on Monday noon of the day on which the Diaconate was to vote. One of the deacons, Lyman Ferrell, expressed great anger at a congregational meeting in May over the fact that a reporter called him for a statement, already knowing how he had voted. Linda Jordan expressed anger over this kind of disclosure and indicated a reporter had called her as well earlier on that day. She must have learned how this came about, however, for she commented to a long time friend of Binkley Church that a Duke University student had leaked the details to the press and she would correct the errors reported. Of course, the question still remains as to how "a Duke University student" learned what had happened in the meeting of the Diaconate.

However, Jenkins went on in his letter to address the larger issue of Biblical standards for guidance in life, stating that the "elevation of human opinion over both scripture and church tradition represents the highest form of idolatry," substituting "individual opinion for the Word of God." "I cannot serve a church whose leaders have such a low opinion of scripture and the teachings of the church."

Additionally, Jenkins addressed a question as to the limits of the church's policy of inclusiveness.

What are the boundaries which define what it means to be a Christian, a church leader, or a minister at Binkley? In voting to license John, Binkley's leadership is saying that any lifestyle is acceptable. The leadership also seems to say that there are no ideological tests as well. Yet very real boundaries exist at Binkley. The church's worship, education, and outreach routinely exclude anyone who lacks advanced education, everyone who is not middle class, and the vast majority of non-whites. Despite the church's vaulted rhetoric, its elitism, classicism, and racism are evident at every service. Just look at who is not there. . . . I cannot be a part of a community that tolerates prejudice and ideological narrowness but will not enforce behavioral or doctrinal standards for leadership.

Speaking as a church historian who had been a member for nearly two years, Jenkins added that "Those churches which attempt to include everyone often end up including very few. Growing churches and denominations are those which have been willing to set limits and to proclaim 'Thus saith the Lord.'" Reflecting upon the fact that the traditional Baptist definition of "church" is a covenanted community of like-minded believers seeking to advance the kingdom of God, he observed:

I feel that the leadership through its actions has broken that covenant and it is increasingly obvious that we are not like-minded. We cannot even agree as to what the kingdom of God is, much less how to advance it.

The Chair of the Diaconate, Jim Wells, responded on February 22, with an 8 page letter. To the charge of having orchestrated the process, Wells said:

While it makes sense to me that you might think that way and, therefore, feel deceived, hurt, and angry, I can assure you that my intent as chairperson of the diaconate has been to allow for a full expression of all sides of the issue with as complete participation on the part of the membership as possible. I acknowledge my own initial reaction to John's request was biased by my own journey up until that time, but every stage of our process has been fully discussed by the entire Diaconate. We have reached apparent consensus on every decision concerning the process. I am not aware of any deacon raising a point of concern that hasn't been taken seriously by the entire group.

After sketching the steps in the process which had been followed during the previous several months, stressing the openness and availability of every aspect of planning to the membership with their personal involvement, Wells stated:

When, for whatever reason, only a few people had availed themselves of the reading materials [in the church library], I put together what I believed to be a representative sample of the materials and made them available to everyone in the narthex. I believe Byron McCane and Richard Hays very articulately state the major reasons not to accept a practicing homosexual as a church leader. Being at the end of the packet (along with the resolutions from the Southern Baptist Convention) makes theirs the last voices heard on the subject by someone reading the material.

With respect to the choice of speakers who addressed the Diaconate and members of the congregation, Wells said that he could not help that Richard Hays declined the invitation to speak. In his place Steven Hoogerwerf presented Hayes' perspectives along with others.

The Diaconate was asked if anyone wished to hear from any further speakers, and no one to my knowledge asked that anyone else be invited. No other names of speakers, again to my knowledge, were suggested by any member of the congregation.

Wells then described his intent in the process of setting up the meeting of John Blevins with the Diaconate in fairness to John:

It was then decided (again in fairness to John who would be facing such a large group) that initial questions should be given to John in advance (though some he saw for the first time that night) and in writing. This would allow for the questioner (whether deacon or other member) to carefully consider their most important concerns without the pressure of the moment and then with anonymity express those concerns in the form of questions. Everyone with questions would be able to ask them without concern for shyness or any other barrier to participation.

As to Jenkins' charge that he coached Blevins on questions asked, he responded:

It is my recollection that he [Blevins] did not understand the question asked of him about transference and countertransference which are psychiatric terms and not theological ones. Being a psychiatrist, I felt the concept is important and that the question should be answered if possible. I, for that reason, explained to John the general meaning of the terms and asked him to try again to answer the question. I am not sure how that constitute's abuse of the chair's power.

Regarding the confusion factor introduced in the meeting by sharing Mahan Siler's document, he said:

I wanted the Diaconate to be thinking about what further process we might want to undertake after we decided on a recommendation to the congregation. Whether we voted to recommend approval of John's request or decided to reject his request and not take it to the congregation, we would still need to consider how to process the matter as an entire congregation.

Commenting on Jenkins' criticism of Wells' report of the unanimity of the licensure committee's vote, Wells added:

I do not remember exactly what I may have said about the vote of the licensure committee, but I believe I said that the committee had been unanimous in their affirmation of John's call to the ministry and his talents for ministry, though one member (Byron McCane) felt John's homosexuality was a serious problem.

Wells decried the press coverage and the inaccuracies in the *News and Observer* article, which the Church tried to correct with a fact sheet. He spent the rest of the letter discussing how he has arrived at his position regarding homosexuality, acknowledging his own bias on the subject. Wells is a practicing psychiatrist, working with homosexual persons as a counselor, and has a brother whom Wells has said was homosexual, all of which, he admits, has conditioned his view of the issue in a more favorable light than other persons, perhaps.

With regard to Blevin's homosexuality, Wells discusses Blevins' changing position on

the practice of his sexuality.

John acknowledged at the diaconate meeting that he had practiced homosexual behavior within the context of a committed but not fully committed relationship. In behaving that way, he has done what so many of us in our society have done whether homosexual or heterosexual. Is it a sin? Is it hurtful? I think the answer is 'yes.' As a result of my concern for John and the hurt I could imagine might result from his premarital sexual involvement, I talked with him at length about the issue. He said in the course of our conversation that he had himself been concerned about this; and after your [Jenkins] questions of him concerning a 'double standard for homosexuals and heterosexuals,' he has changed his position and now believes everyone whether heterosexual or homosexual should remain sexually celibate until full commitment within a monogamous relationship has been attained. Hopefully this will include a ceremony of union.

The importance of the Jenkins/Wells exchange lies in the opposing perceptions and positions expressed. These reveal the extreme polarity which existed at the time the congregation was led into a vote by the leadership under the existing constitutional provisions, a polarity in perceptions which only increased in definition as the designated voting day approached.

The Kelley Letter And Warning

On February 25, 1992, one member, Allen Kelley, wrote Linda Jordan, with copies to the chair of the Diaconate, the Moderator and his own Deacon. He indicated that he and his wife had had a two hour discussion with their deacon, and were deeply concerned about the process:

Our discussion with him confirmed our judgment that we are being rushed; that a large number of our church members do not know the implications of the issues before them; and that failure to devise adequate means for open, thoughtful and deep discussion of the issues at hand will destroy the essence of what Binkley is and should be about. In our haste, I fear we are unwittingly being dishonest with ourselves.

In spite of the fact that they had heard Linda's and John Blevin's sermons, and, as lay persons, were aware that the church was studying the issue of homosexuality, which seemed quite logical to them for Binkley to do, it was from the *Durham Morning Herald* that the Kelleys learned the Deacons had been considering this issue for quite a long time with Blevin's request as the specific motivation. He continued:

However, we now learn the issue before the deacons was not homosexuality in general; it was instead the issue of embracing homosexuality, and possibly its advocacy, within the clergy. This, in my mind, is a much more complex issue.

If it has taken the Deacons a year or so to ponder this complex issue, I submit that the laity deserves and requires more than a few weeks. To put the membership on 'fast track' will represent, I fear, a 'delegation of thinking and full preparation' only to our elected representatives. No Baptist believes this to be an acceptable posture.

I submit that the recent forums for considering the issues have been inappropriate to the task, and demonstrably so. Group meetings in the church will be predictably ineffective. In contrast, meetings over a meal, in homes, with six or eight persons, are required; groupings of persons with similar ages and carefully selected resource persons are required. These are sensitive and personal matters to most people. Our church members need to be able to verbalize freely and openly. That cannot be accomplished in large group formats; it moreover cannot be effected with small groups meeting here and there in the church.

Making available and announcing the existence of some books and materials on homosexuality in the church is little more than 'base covering.' This is not true 'preparation'.

Kelley commented that he went to the Church the day before, checked out all the materials and read them thoroughly. He had been the "first person to sign them out in many weeks. The demand is not especially robust -- one index that such preparation should be viewed as quite ineffective." The format he suggested was a one-on-one conversation with a deacon in the home. That is why he and his wife invited theirs to come. And, he realized that other deacons were not doing this. He admitted that a proper consideration of the issue could not be accomplished by the time of Blevin's graduation from Duke, but added that this date is

expendable if it means that we have not provided our congregation (as a whole, as distinct from the deacons) a full opportunity to come to grips with the issue. Worse, rushing to this date will be perceived by many as a means of cutting short, possibly with the unwitting object of avoiding, a full discussion.

After sounding this warning, Kelley said that "We must be honest with ourselves." If he sounded like he is opposed to the recommendation of the Deacons, he was not. "I am simply confused." What he was sure of was that the Diaconate had not considered the issue sufficiently, had elected to study the issue timidly as a result, was not being honest with itself and was "unwittingly pushing this forward hastily to avoid confronting the appropriate depth of the issues involved." Kelley pointed out:

The issue is not licensure. Making a distinction between this and ordination is splitting hairs. The emphasis in the materials I have read is an insult to our

intelligence.

The real issue is not homosexuality in general. Most of us will, with proper education, be inclusive of love for our homosexual brethren as a community in faith.

The real issue is not recognizing and blessing, even encouraging wholesome homosexual relationships for the 10% of the population that is biologically/socially/psychologically born into this inclination.

The real issue is instead whether we recognize, bless, and encourage the advocacy of this lifestyle, by word, deed, and example, by a member of the clergy not only to the 10% of the population that are homosexuals, but also to a much larger group of bisexuals along the continuum of sexuality.

Kelley placed a test before the Diaconate saying that the real test of its courage would be to ask if it was willing, not just to license Blevins, but to offer him the position of Associate Minister for our youth and "to permit and encourage him to espouse his beliefs and sexuality as led by his conscience, with no constraints whatever." He added that if we cannot make this commitment to Blevins with our own youth, then we are simply "patting John on the head" and sending him off to another church which may have that courage to face this test "which, I submit, we have not yet been willing to even discuss as a congregation."

As to his own position on the issue, Kelley believed that with time the church could and would vote favorably on the issue, but he was not yet ready to embrace the test he had proposed, and would not be prepared to do so by Blevins' graduation from Duke. He concluded:

If Binkley is not courageous enough to explore the issue before us to its fullest implications, and if we rush forward in haste in what will be a demonstrably uninformed vote on such an important issue, we will have ceased to be the church of enlightenment and conviction. We will [be] considered a superficial espouser of liberal ideas for others to live out.

The Process For The Congregation

At the Church Council meeting on February 17, Jim Wells presented a summary of member opinions on how to proceed with the Blevins request. This summary was the result of a survey conducted by the deacons among their assigned members. [Summary of Diaconate Process, March 2, 1992, p.16].

A large percentage (60-70%) of the congregation indicated that they had been following the Diaconate process and are prepared to vote without further information or discussion. There was much favorable feedback about the

Diaconate process with many expressing appreciation for how thorough it has been.

Many members have expressed a desire for a secret ballot at the time of voting.

Some have requested opportunities for small group discussion. There has been little interest in more speakers or resource materials, though a few members have not been aware of the issue being before us or the availability of tapes and reading material.

A few have requested a summary of the Diaconate process in educating itself on the issue of homosexuality and preparing itself for the February 3 vote.

A few have requested to hear position statements from individual deacons.

One person has expressed concern that we not vote on John's licensure request until the Congregation has made a statement about the private nature of sexuality in general.

Given the response thus far received, the following recommendation is made:

- 1. Send 'Fact Sheet' outlining process-to-date in tomorrow's newsletter. Reemphasize availability of reading materials in the narthex and more extensive materials and tapes in library. Indicate the desirability for all of us to be prayerful about the process and the decision before us.*
- 2. Church Council set a date for a church conference to be held in the next several weeks.*
- 3. Church Council consider offering one of four possible agendas:*
 - a. secret ballot after small group discussion facilitated by Diaconate members and feedback to the entire meeting from small groups.*
 - b. secret ballot after brief summary of perspectives and small group discussion facilitated by Diaconate members with feedback to the entire meeting and opportunities for anyone to make comments.*
 - c. several small group options in homes and/or at church prior to a congregational meeting where discussion is followed by a secret ballot.*
 - d. congregational meeting with brief summary of perspectives followed by small group discussion on one Sunday night and general discussion and a secret ballot the following Sunday night.*
- 4. Summary of Diaconate process in Newsletter week before congregational meeting.*

The council voted "to present the congregation with several opportunities to discuss the issue during the next several weeks", providing for large and/or small discussion

groups, "possibly leading to a vote by the Church In Conference at the regular meeting set for April 5." Paper ballots would be used and, of course, the congregation had the prerogative to reschedule the vote then if it wished.

The February 18 *Newsletter* provided the following report to the congregation:

"Procedure For Considering Licensure Continues"

At its February 17 meeting the Church council adopted the following procedure for the congregation to consider the Diaconate's recommendation that we accept and approve John Blevins' request for license to preach:

A congregational meeting at 7:00 PM, March 22, beginning with a brief summary of perspectives presented to the Diaconate on the issue of license of someone with a homosexual orientation, continuing with small group discussions, and ending with a report of these discussions being brought back to the whole group at the end of the meeting.

Additional small group discussion opportunities (to be announced) between now and April 5.

At the regular quarterly church conference at 7:00 PM on April 5, further discussions of the Diaconate recommendation and our vote using paper ballot.

Enclosed in this Newsletter is the Fact Sheet outlining the deacons' procedure in this request. We want to emphasize the availability of reading material in the narthex (purple cover sheet) and of more extensive printed material and tapes in the church library. The Council and Diaconate encourage that we all be prayerful about the process and the decision we will make.

In response to this announced plan, Jim Cansler wrote the Moderator on February 22 requesting that the procedure be changed, being concerned with two basic problems:

First, the perspectives presented to the Deacons does not include an advocated opposing view. Second, the congregation as a whole has had no opportunity to discuss this issue in a setting where views and opposing views can be freely aired.

Explaining his reasons for these objections he said:

I believe those leading the movement for licensure have tried to be fair in their presentation. The Byron McCane paper and the Hays paper were included in the packet, and we are told that Hays declined an invitation to speak. The fact

remains, however, that no advocate opposed to licensure has made a presentation. The congregation has, in fact, heard but one side of the issue. I personally suggested to our minister that, since the candidate had filled the pulpit one Sunday and used the occasion to make his case to the congregation, it would be important to have an opposing view presented as well. That has not occurred.

Cansler later said that Linda Jordan told him that she had invited Byron McCane to speak, but he had declined the invitation. McCane, however, has denied he ever received any specific invitation to preach at Binkley. However, due to his refusal to debate Robert Bratcher during his experience with the Diaconate and the licensure committee some months earlier in June, 1991, he said he could understand how someone might take it for granted he already had refused to speak on the issue. If asked, he would indeed have declined. Cansler continued:

And, while appreciative of his effort, Steven Hoogerwerf's laudable attempt to articulate the Hays position to the diaconate has not served this purpose. To say that Steve was an advocate for Hays' position is unfair to him and at odds with the facts.

The second concern is of greater importance. Those of us who have concerns about this course of action now contemplated by our church have had no opportunity to be heard. The issue of Binkley's licensing a person who is avowedly homosexual and admittedly active sexually, has not been formally discussed at all by the congregation. To be sure, the Deacons have discussed it among themselves, and some meetings of the Diaconate have been opened to members. These have not been congregational meetings: The diaconate itself has described them as its meetings to which other church members are invited for the purpose of hearing the presentation. Since such a format limits questions to those directed to the presenter and makes congregational exchange inappropriate, it is not a setting in which the congregation can express its own concerns and beliefs.

The concern for an opportunity to be heard is deepened by the announced procedure for the March 22 meeting, as described, apparently does not contemplate the presentation or discussion of any material or point of view other than those already in the perspectives presented to the Diaconate. It could be interpreted to prohibit them.

I truly believe our Church is at a crucial point in its corporate life. The issues are complex and the consequences are far-reaching. Personal feelings run deep on both sides and not all opposition concerns relate to the candidate's sexual orientation.

At this point Cansler addressed the theological issues which he observed were ignored in simply treating the Diaconate's recommendation to license Blevins with a "yes" or "no" vote.

We cannot discuss this issue without considering bedrock beliefs of the Christian church: the nature of the church, the meaning of Christian love, the nature of the Christian ministry (as opposed to Christian service), Christian anthropology, the Christian concept of the family as a participative agent in God's creation, and Christian sexual ethics.

We must also address a doctrine basic in Christian thought: the role of scripture in matters of faith and conduct. By enduring criteria do we quote Paul in one verse and say, 'This is the truth and can be trusted. It is the Word of God.'; then quote him in another verse and say, 'Disregard Paul!?' (Both quotes heard in Binkley this year) What are the filters we are to lay over the Bible's words to make sure the 'Truth' shines through? If our criteria for Scripture's defining Christian faith or illuminating ethical decisions are within the reader, then we owe it to ourselves to identify and test the criteria we are to use. If they are within the church, then which church - a local congregation or the Church universal? And if determined by a local vote, does the 'voice of the people' become 'the voice of God'? To put our licensure question another way and in the rubrics of H. Richard Niebuhr, how can the Church in the post sexual revolution era negotiate faithfully and with integrity the inevitable and seductive interactions of Christ and culture?

These are big questions. All are explicit in the issue we are now asked almost simplistically to vote up or down. I am concerned that, to date, we have not seemed to give them the attention I believe they deserve. It is my earnest hope that our announced procedures will give members the strong impression that full, open discussion is desired and opposing views are welcome.

On March 2 the Diaconate again discussed the Council format for the March 22 congregational meeting, including a large group meeting and small group discussions. It was decided that a small group meeting would be led by Linda Jordan and Steven Hoogerwerf on March 10, and that letters received by the church on the licensure issue from inside and outside the church would be placed in a notebook in the Church library for everyone to read. Further questions regarding the licensure process were brought out by Willis Whichard and others. By March 8 the deacons would present Wells with a summary of the points reflecting their perspectives on the issue.

The March 3 *Newsletter* announced the meeting on March 10 to be led by Jordan and Hoogerwerf and included a letter to the membership from the Moderator, dated March 1, 1992, further explaining the process to be followed. He stated that all persons would have an opportunity to be heard in both full congregational and small group

format and that the congregation had the prerogative to reschedule its vote if it wished. In attempting to "get our corporate decision-making process going" he stated:

We perceive that John would need some closure near this semester's end, that Palm Sunday and Easter and the ending of school immediately follow, April 5th, that there then will be a new Diaconate and a new Church Council, and that April 5th is our regularly scheduled quarterly conference where it is in order to discuss and vote on matters in front of the church.

Due to the University's Spring break on March 1 and the Lenten services scheduled on the evenings of March 8 and 15, the evening of March 22 was selected for the first congregational meeting and the "Council presumed that desired discussion formats would emerge for the weeks between March 22nd and April 5th, and that by April 5th we could be ready to vote following another round of discussion."

In this same *Newsletter* the Chair of Diaconate announced to the membership the placement of the letters received by members and others in a notebook in the library and extended an invitation for anyone to write letters to be included, adding that this was "meant to allow for clear articulation of perspectives and is not in any way to preclude verbal discussion."

The Canslers' Open Letter

Jim and Dot Cansler wrote an open letter which they mailed themselves to the entire membership on March 5, 1992, addressing the process and the issue from their perspective. First of all they expressed regret that the issue of homosexuality was introduced within the request of John Blevins, for it cannot be considered "apart from its personal embodiment by him. . . . We are asked to vote on a *person* rather than the *principle* at the heart of our concern."

The Canslers go on to express their views on the issue of homosexuality with respect to Christian morality and the role of discipline and corporate beliefs in the life of lay and ordained persons with regard to their responsibility towards expected standards of conduct. Stating that a higher standard has been traditionally expected of ordained ministers because the church has viewed the ministry as a high calling from God, they add that those who are ordained "are given offices of great respect and strong moral influence in the church's life." Through these offices ministers are "granted formal authority to teach the ways and proclaim the will of God", "given the role of exemplar of Christian faith and practice" and "are the spiritual and moral leaders of the local church." The Canslers' view of homosexuality as scripturally defined sin, therefore, relegates such practice as incompatible with the qualifications required of an ordained minister.

Secondly, they point out that Binkley Church is being asked to license an individual, although it has no stated policy or procedure for its provision. Thirdly, the congregation is asked to arrive at a decision on this whole issue within two weeks after the Diaconate has deliberated for nine months. "We cannot discuss the issue without

considering bedrock beliefs of the Christian Church . . .”

The issue will impact Christian education profoundly. Its impact on pastoral ministry will also be significant. Moreover, since the Scriptures are univocal in their condemnation, we cannot assert the rightness of homosexual practice without either reinterpreting Scripture or disregarding it. By what criteria transcendent of contemporary culture, or personal subjective bias, will we do either? . . . When we propose to reinterpret Scripture or disregard it, we must know that we tinker with the very foundation of our faith. Where does the tinkering end? What other cultural agenda will prompt us to tinker more?

The Council Plans Continue

On March 10 Linda Jordan and Steve Hoogerwerf held a small group meeting. After asking members present for some of the questions about which they were concerned, Jordan divided those present into groups of three called “creative triads.” One person from each point of view was to argue for the opposite point of view and the third person was to observe the discussion. Mike Berkut later said that he realized this was simply a technique devised to defuse resistance to licensure and left early. Other members left rather disgusted with this waste of time in what they perceived as a rather immature way of dealing with mature adults.

At the Council meeting on March 16, following a discussion of the agenda and procedures for the church meeting on March 22, Bill Moffitt’s motion carried to prepare a special first class mailing to all members, including the *Newsletter* and appropriate attachments. Jim wells added that a statement would be included that “any member unable to attend one of the discussion meetings should submit a one-page statement to him (Jim Wells) to be read at the meeting.” Jim Wells’ motion was passed to include a notice that any member needing transportation to the discussion meetings should call the church office or his/her deacon. Transportation would be provided by the Diaconate.

After the group discussion led by Jordan and Hoogerwerf on March 10, the Kelleys wrote an open letter to the entire membership which they, too, mailed themselves, to which they attached a copy of the letter they had sent to Jordan two weeks before. Alan Kelley proposed several steps in a process which he hoped the leadership would follow.

First, the formation of a very specific interpretation of open homosexuality of the clergy, leading to the implication that homosexuality was to be openly sanctioned, advocated and celebrated as appropriate by our clergy with the ultimate test of whether we would hire such a minister for our youth. “If our Deacons are unwilling or unable to do this, after their nine-month study, then we are unprepared.”

Secondly, Kelley encouraged the circulation of letters among the membership, such as the Canslers’ letter. Making letters available in the library two weeks before the first large congregational meeting he considered to be too little, too late.

Thirdly individual meetings between pastors and deacons with the membership were strongly advocated. Polling questionnaires and telephone calls were deemed insufficient and inadequate substitutes. He further declared that membership dialogue must continue

in a format wherein members feel comfortable, and that large groups, small groups or even "creative triads" are not the answer because of the great personal sensitivity of the issues. And, lastly, he hoped the membership would encourage the Council to postpone any vote on the licensure of Blevins until these steps had been accomplished.

Kelley concluded this open letter to the membership:

Sadly, it is the feeling of being 'rushed,' together with our demonstrable failure to confront directly the implications of our seemingly 'bold licensure decision', that jointly represents the sources of massive frustration by a sizable constituency of our church. These two issues will predictably be the very ones that drive loyal and good people from our membership -- not the issue of homosexuality itself!

Diaconate Summary Statement On Opposing Views

The Diaconate met again on March 17 and meeting plans formulated by the Church Council for March 22 and April 5 were reported. A discussion followed on the summary statement the Diaconate would provide the congregation. A summary of the deacon's statements was prepared by Steve Hoogerwerf representing both sides of the issue. The following statements were included:

IN FAVOR OF THE RECOMMENDATION

- 1. We believe that John has been called by God to the Christian ministry. He is a qualified candidate for the ministry by the accepted educational standards. Licensure simply recognizes John's qualifications and Call, and our congregation's support of his pilgrimage to ministry.*
- 2. Binkley Church has long accepted homosexuals into full membership and church life. Once a person is baptized, that person is a full member of the community of faith. There should be no restrictions on that person's services to the community in response to the Lord's Call.*
- 3. The scriptural testimony on homosexuality condemns abusive and/or exploitive sexual behavior. Jesus did not speak to the issue of homosexuality. The overall Biblical message is one of love.*
- 4. Christian faith compels us to examine church tradition in the light of new evidence. The present state of knowledge and insight can no longer sufficiently support the unqualified condemnation of all homosexual practice.*
- 5. Homosexuality can be practiced within an intimate relationship which expresses the love, respect, mutuality, and commitment possible in a*

heterosexual relationship. When practiced in this way, homosexuality can be life-affirming and harms neither individuals nor the community.

OPPOSED TO THE RECOMMENDATION

- 1. The Scriptures speak clearly to the point that homosexual behavior is sinful. The creation story, Biblical teaching about marriage, and specific admonitions against homosexuality support this position. Specific Scripture references include Genesis 1-2, Romans 1, and I Corinthians 6-9.*
- 2. Intimate sexual activity outside of marriage is immoral, regardless of sexual orientation, and renders a candidate unsuitable for licensure.*
- 3. A practicing homosexual is an inappropriate role model as a minister.*
- 4. While we celebrate the inclusive nature of our congregation, being inclusive does not require approval of sinful behavior. In the same way, moral disapproval cannot be equated with having a lack of love, acceptance, or regard for civil rights and social justice.*
- 5. The traditional teaching of the Christian Church for 2000 years opposes the practice of homosexuality. There is not sufficient evidence to abandon this position.*
- 6. The fact that homosexuality might be caused by factors beyond a person's control does not mean that the practice of homosexuality ought to be affirmed.*
- 7. To affirm and accept a request for licensure by a homosexual is to accept and affirm homosexuality - a position we cannot accept.*

Attached to this statement was a list of questions and concerns that were considered to be relevant in the deacon's consideration of John Blevins' request for licensure. These statements were categorized into areas of concern, namely Biblical, theological/ethical, scientific, ecclesiastical, pastoral, process, and implications of yes and no votes on the deacons' recommendation. This list of questions and concerns is provided in the appendix.

On March 18th a packet of relevant materials was sent out to the congregation, including church conference procedures, relevant constitutional provisions, the "for" and "against" statements from the Diaconate, and the list of questions and concerns regarding the issue of licensure. A letter from the moderator was included saying that:

... there can be many, many meetings for discussion and dialogue [beginning

with the March 22 meeting] with no fear of a vote being taken, but with the clear understanding that on April 5, 1992, motions and voting are in order. We are trying diligently to structure an open, thoughtful, respectful and fair consideration of this issue.

Two weeks was considered by many as an insufficient time in which to reach a judicious decision on such a complex issue which struck at the very foundations of individual beliefs.

Congregational Discussions Begin

Between the first congregational meeting on 22 March, which initiated the discussion process among the members, and the vote on April 5, there were meetings held each Sunday and Tuesday and on one Thursday. The Sunday night meetings had perhaps 150 to 200 present of the 544 registered members. The Tuesday night meetings were less well attended and only 10 persons participated in the one Thursday night meeting held. The moderator asked each time if there were reporters in the room and requested them to leave since this was a closed meeting for members only. Statements were invited from anyone in the group and the preponderance of public statements made by those attending the meetings were in support of licensure. Some members openly declared themselves to be homosexual for the first time as they spoke to the issue. Comments ranged from a traditional Biblical stand against homosexual behavior as a sin to outright support as a logical result of Christian inclusivity with even flippant attempts at being humorous such as: "The Lord had twelve disciples and the chances are that one of them was probably gay, anyway." Some of the statements quoted below may have been actually presented on a different date than that on the typed copy.

John Humber observed that to say the issue was simply the licensure of one person was ignoring the real issue which was homosexuality. And, that until we understood in our own minds how this issue related to us individually and to our corporate life as a Christian congregation, we could not properly determine if an individual is fit for the ministry where this issue is involved. He said that Binkley Church needed to adopt a statement of policy reflecting its position and belief regarding sexuality and its relationship to the church and its life of faith before it could instruct any ordination committee on how to act in its behalf. He urged the deferment of the Blevins licensure decision until this step had been taken.

Paul Lindsay spoke eloquently against the condemnation of gay and lesbian people by society, describing his experiences as a pastor in meeting homosexual persons and getting to know them. He viewed Hays' presentation of the "wider Biblical framework" as narrow, asking how we talk of Biblical faith "without discussing the steadfast love of God, the Prophets' and Jesus' concern for love and justice, the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Last Judgement, the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' consistent example of accepting persons who are rejected by conventional society." He observed that the only reason Blevins' licensure is in question is because he is gay. "The issue is, simply: is it O.K. to be gay? The time has come for us to decide -- yes or no. We can

no longer evade the issue.”

Grace Wagoner made an equally eloquent appeal to oppose licensure saying that homosexual *orientation* was not a sin, but that she believed homosexual *behavior* was morally wrong. She stated that in considering someone for licensure or ordination, “the issue should not be his/her homosexuality as such, but rather the applicant’s total view of human sexuality and his/her understanding of the morality of its use.” She went on to say that “licensure or ordination sets one apart as a role model and establishes a benchmark for the moral standard of that church” and “indicates implicitly and explicitly that the church sanctions his/her lifestyle.” She said her own personal tolerance of a person’s conduct is a very different matter from “that of a corporate body of Christians sanctioning a person’s conduct which is contrary to the prevailing moral standards of the Church in all its previous teachings and practices.” She added that “granting such sanctions should never be done hastily.” To those who had told her that this issue was just dealing with licensure, not ordination, she answered that

... licensure, ordination, the blessing of a Gay union are but a few of the many facets of a much larger picture and should not be dealt with in piecemeal fashion because of their far-reaching implications. My friends, we must not let ourselves be driven by a graduation time frame in acting on this, the most important issue this Church has ever had to deal with. ... It has taken our Diaconate 11 months to discuss the matter. How can we as a congregation seriously deal with the issues in only 30 days.

She continued by expressing her fear of what would happen to the church if it identified with any specific point of view on this issue:

At this time I fear identification with a specific point of view, no matter how worthy you may feel the cause, would clearly be EXCLUSIVE RATHER THAN INCLUSIVE. It would mean that those persons who cannot accept the winning point of view are faced with an impossible dilemma --- either remaining in a church which stands for an agenda which they find incompatible with their own obedience to Christ, or to leave the church.”

In a final plea she said:

On an issue on which the whole body of believers finds so many unresolved questions, I beg you not to force our members to have to face this dilemma. ... We are now at a crossroads --- whatever we decide will have long and far-reaching implications for us as a church and for each of us individually.

As a gay member of the church for the past two years, Stewart Bond spoke to the strong, spontaneously negative perceptions that people have generally exhibited towards homosexuals.

Scripture is interpreted as condemning all aspects of homosexuality as sinful. Additionally, many irrational fears are verbalized in condemning homosexuality. These fears associate homosexuality with child molestation, AIDS, sexual promiscuity, immorality, destruction of the 'family', and inadequate and unfit leadership and role-modeling.

Commenting on the notion espoused by some that homosexuality is all right if it is not known or disclosed, he remarked that throughout history the Church has been led by clergy and ordained lay persons who were gay and lesbian. He added:

However, this aspect of our lives has been and is often hidden from many. We have preached, led worship, taught Sunday school to all age groups, led music programs, sung in the choir, played musical instruments, served on committees, provided individual and/or marriage and family counseling, performed weddings and funerals, and cared for the sick and dying. More importantly, some of us have served as Christian role-models for some of you and your children. It is sad that, as gay and lesbians Christians, we often cannot be completely open and honest about who we are without fearing that the Church will be unwilling to know us and accept us as whole and worthy persons suitable for Christian ministry.

Bond disagreed with those who wanted the issue to be separated from the person, saying that "in the case of licensure or ordination the person under consideration is the issue or focus and not homosexuality." He notes that Jesus did not comment on homosexuality at all and "as Christians and a community of faith, he did teach us all to be radically loving and radically inclusive opposing all forms of discrimination and injustice."

Jim Cansler had nothing to add on the issue of licensure and homosexuality, itself, to what he and Dot had said in the open letter to the membership earlier in March. He spoke briefly, however, to the autonomy of the local church, commenting on the news item recently mentioned in the media that the Executive Committee of the North Carolina Baptist Convention was considering recommending the refusal of funds from churches which openly approved of homosexuality. The division of opinion was over whether excluding such churches would be interfering with local church autonomy and establishing a creedal concept hitherto unknown in the Baptist denomination. He considered that such a move by the State Convention could not be viewed as an abrogation of local church autonomy because the local church was, indeed, free to do as it wished in this matter, regardless of what the State Convention did or did not do. He also pointed out, however, that the State Convention also was an autonomous body and could act independently of local churches in support of the principles and beliefs which it represented for the majority will of North Carolina Baptists.

Robert Bratcher addressed again his view of the issue of ordination saying that there is no hierarchy in the Church, that "to set aside someone to a given office is to recognize

that God has called and endowed that person for that particular service or ministry," and that the laying on of hands "does not confer upon that member of the church a higher status than he/she occupied before." He said that "the only hierarchy in the fellowship is that of humble service." He added:

There is no difference between 'ministry' and 'service' in the Church. All ministry has equal standing; none is more honorable or prestigious than the other; none carries a higher rank than the other. They are all different ways of serving/ministering, in accordance with the particular gift that the Holy Spirit has given each one. Every member of the church is called upon to serve/minister.

To become a member of the church, through the sacrament of baptism, is to be incorporated into the Body of Christ and called to ministry. Our baptism is our ordination to service.

Then, he adds, for practical purposes we provide the means that enable some people to devote full time or a major portion of their time to ministry/service, but this does not raise them to a higher rank or create a hierarchy. Presumably, he is referring here to the ordination of a minister. Although he refrains from using that term at this point in that context, he does so below. He asks, therefore:

... can we impose upon those members of the Body different standards from those we impose on the others? Do we require of them a particular lifestyle, different from the one we expect from other members of the Body? To do so is to establish a hierarchy in the Body of Christ -- which, in effect, transforms the Body into an organization, the community into an institution, the fellowship into a corporation. What we require of those we ordain to a ministry/service is the same we require of all members of the Body: a faithful commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and a life that brings honor to His name and furthers His saving ministry among all humankind.

Bratcher then observed that Blevins' fitness to be an ordained minister, about which he has no doubt, is the issue and not his sexual preference, for if the latter is the only issue in question, then we should never have admitted him into membership in Binkley Church. He concluded that "... we cannot impose on a candidate for the ministry any requirement not imposed when he/she joined the church."

Jim Wells spoke as an individual member in support of licensure, not as Chair of the Diaconate. He stated that he had increasingly come to believe that Binkley should adopt a statement on sexuality in general and he provided members present with a copy of "A Personal Affirmation Of Faith In God's Love" which he offered as encompassing "sexuality expressed by a single individual and sexuality expressed by two people of either opposite or the same gender." After reflecting generally upon the equal importance of all human beings in God's sight and His call to each of us to support and

love one another and share our abundance with each other, the statement said:

Human sexuality is a gift from God through which we can joyfully celebrate God's love for us. Our sexuality may be experienced and expressed in many loving ways as well as in many unloving ways. Adult sexuality between two people is expressed most lovingly when it is a part of a loving, mutual, respectful, committed, monogamous, fully intimate relationship which is supported by a community of faith. Genital sexual expression between two people in any other context has the strong potential for harm, and would, therefore, be out of harmony with God's Love.

In speaking to the membership, John Blevins indicated that he had some misgivings about the corporate process being used to reach a decision regarding his request for licensure because he "felt that I am being talked about and not talked to." He indicated that he did not think the church would have addressed the issue of homosexuality if he had not requested licensure. Remarking that Robert Seymour's sermon on homosexuality was nearly ten years ago [1983], he noted that no corporate response had been made since then.

I would imagine the struggle we find ourselves in today would not be occurring if we simply waited until the time that the congregation decided to address gay men and lesbians as abstract moral issues rather than persons. In short, while I understand that my specific request for licensing has focused this issue in tense and potentially divisive ways, I also believe that it has been the means -- the only means I can see -- by which the church has deemed it necessary to address a controversial issue that it might otherwise choose to avoid.

Blevins would seem quite justified in rendering this judgement on Binkley Church, and perhaps most other churches as well. He continued:

The only way in which we can address these issues without causing deep, lasting division is to discuss our concerns with one another -- all of us together. I realize that many who have serious misgivings regarding the legitimacy of practicing lesbians and gay men as persons of faith have felt that their concerns have been discounted; for that I am sorry. However, I too have felt discounted. In June all deacons were asked to take a few hours to talk to me individually in light of my request. Only two did so. In addition, aside from the lesbian and gay members here at Binkley only two members of the congregation have approached me allowing for an opportunity for us to discuss our feelings and perceptions together. I would hope that as we all seek to be more deliberate in our attempts at mutual dialogue that all members of the congregation are heard: those who support this request, those who oppose it, those who are uncertain, and those for whom this is more important than a mere issue -- all of the lesbian and gay

members of this congregation.

In speaking to his own concept of sexual behavior, about which he said he had been unclear at the deacons' meeting in January in order to protect someone else, he said:

I believe that sexual expression is appropriate when practiced in a relationship of love and concern. That relationship should be serious and committed, with life-long monogamy the desired goal for sexual expression within that relationship. In short, two persons of faith should enter into sexual relations within the context of a covenant between themselves and God. The community of faith underwrites and supports that covenant for heterosexuals through marriage as part of its Christian witness. However, for lesbians and gay men, the communal expression of that covenant is not an option in most cases. As the church looks with new eyes of discernment regarding gay men and lesbians, perhaps this expression will become viable. However, I do not believe that lesbians or gay men who express their commitments to one another through fidelitous sexual relationships within the context of that covenant are acting in sin, even though the communal expression is not possible. That is my own ethical understanding right now. It is the basis upon which I intend to behave sexually.

Two persons who were born and grew up in Binkley Church spoke to each side of the issue. David Bibb spoke with great feeling about discovering his own homosexuality as a boy and seeking in vain for an adequate role model in his church.

What I am trying to say is that I really felt that I was a part of the church family. It was a loving group of people, and I knew that I was accepted. But way down deep, I always had known that I was somehow different, even when I was 10 years old. By 17 I had come out to close friends at school, my parents, and Tom Clifton, the Associate Pastor at the time. He was very supportive of me and suggested that I visit the gay student group on campus.

This is how my desperate search for gay role models began. Young gays need role models just like any other youth. We needed examples to follow, challenges to aspire to. We needed to feel accepted. But in spite of coming out in Sunday School, and in general being as open as any insecure youngster could possibly be, few role models were there for me at Binkley. So imagine what it was like for me, surrounded as I was by the most loving church family of which I knew I was a part, imagine that in spite of it all, I felt isolated, cut off, alone. It was very painful.

But now Binkley has a new opportunity. John Blevins has found the desire, will and strength to give of himself in the same way of many ministers before him. His being gay only increases his ability to do so, for undoubtedly part of him

seeks to fill a void that I myself have felt. Binkley can endorse John and know that we are strengthening our church family in the process. Certainly I wish that he had been around 15 years ago when I was so in need of his strength. Even now I am searching for role models.

Sharon Kepley, a contemporary of David Bibb's, also born and reared as a Binkley youth and completing her tenure as an elected deacon at the time when Blevins requested licensure in 1991, referred to the dilemma caused by Blevin's announcement of his homosexuality in conjunction with his request for licensure in these terms:

However, upon receiving this knowledge [Blevins' homosexuality], we are now accountable to John, our society (church), and to our Creator. We must humbly and mercifully offer counsel to one another as corporately we seek God's Will to call us to Himself in love and communion with His Holiness.

Ours is not to judge, but neither to misguide or offer false teachings. Rather, we must be about living God's word as has been revealed in scripture lest we wax and wane in our own power for rationalization and questionable exegesis. Will our faith response be one of obedience to the One we call Lord or will we remain in our natural rebellious state?

In Matthew and Mark, our Lord speaks to us of the 'gift' of sex. Jesus states, '...from the beginning the Creator made them male and female and the two will become one flesh.' Jesus was not bound by His culture, He chose his words as He knew their power.

Are we now to say that rather than a gift, within God's framework, that sexual expression is some sort of birthright in and of itself? To give credence to the homosexual lifestyle we are saying that each person has the privilege of expressing and experiencing sex in their, not His, own circumstances.

In entertaining so many of our 'concerns', have we lost the wisdom in separating 'love' from 'sex'? If so, we are teaching that all whole relationships require sexual expression if fulfillment is attainable in that relationship. Has sex risen to an idol status, in our society, as optimal therefore to be nurtured and even worshiped? Do we no longer seek to deny the desires of our flesh in order to honor the calling of our souls? Have we now come so far as to say that the quality of our human experience is compromised if we don't act on our sexual attractions?

Scripture offers no support for the homosexual expression and Jesus' greatness was no less for never marrying nor expressing sexual feelings. Does our 'hope' lie in finding a sexual partner or does our 'hope' remain in redemption?

Kepley concluded her thoughts by saying:

We must offer the commitment to stand by one another's struggles towards heeding our call to wholeness. Only then can we empower each other with Christ's transcendental love lest we reduce Him to merely a wise rabbi somewhere in our history.

Tuesday Night Meeting, March 24th

Additional statements to the entire group were made mostly supporting the issue. Among them Olin Jolly, a resident in psychiatry and an openly gay member of Binkley Church, offered a statement to the membership in which he spoke of growing up with no gay role model that he could look up to and of the hate, violence and pious disapproval he has encountered over the years. That "American psychiatry has come to treat heterosexuality and homosexuality as equally healthy human drives," he says, "does not mean, as some suggest, that it approves of just any sexual behavior." Some persons do not

... seem to be able to distinguish ... responsible, loving, nurturing homosexuality with irresponsible homosexual behavior. This would be like equating ... any heterosexual marriage with various destructive heterosexual behaviors. ... Binkley Church has not explicitly persecuted gays, but has stood by silently. In not taking a stand against hatred and ignorance, it has served to condone them.

The group was then broken into small discussion groups and a number reported on their discussions at the next Sunday night meeting.

Thursday Night Meeting, March 26, 1992

At the Thursday night meeting held on March 26th, 10 persons attended, including the Diaconate Chair, the Moderator and at least two deacons. All but two present seemed to favor licensure. Perhaps one of the most astute questions asked during this whole year long process, was phrased that evening by a 17 year old youth member who asked the group of adults for help in understanding a problem he had difficulty in resolving: "How do you determine what parts of the Bible you accept and what parts you can reject?" No one could answer him. The only direct comment made was that he would have to decide that question for himself.

One person asked about the availability of an absentee ballot on April 5th and was told that there was no such provision in the constitution. The Moderator said he would determine from an official parliamentarian to be hired for the night of April 5 whether or not the meeting could be recessed to allow persons to vote during the week when they could come to the church. Nothing was heard of this suggestion again, even though that is the process the church used earlier in the 1980's when deciding to build the present sanctuary.

Some comments made by the Chair of the Diaconate were perceived as disturbing by some members present, for they seemed to suggest in their minds that a predetermined pattern had been set in motion. He commented that once we had all been through "the process," referring to the educational program conducted through the Fall and Spring described above, we would all understand the validity of approving licensure for homosexual persons. In fact, he said, he felt it was unfortunate that there were people who would come and vote who had not been through "the process." This was viewed by some as a rather startling and disenfranchising statement on the part of one of the Church's principal leaders. As to the position of adopting a Church policy on sexuality before deciding on the Blevins licensure, he agreed that we needed such a policy and that *after* we approved the licensure, we could spend the next year, two years or even five years, if need be, exploring our sexuality. He said that voting on the licensure was not making a statement on homosexuality, but was simply granting to one eminently qualified young man a license to preach the Gospel. This position was immediately refuted by one of the deacons present who favored licensure, saying that any vote on licensure could not help but make a definite statement on the issue of homosexuality. The meeting broke up on this note.

During the meeting the issue of ordination and what it meant was brought up as well and the Diaconate Chair said that some time ago the Diaconate had formulated a policy for the church which specified that ordination was considered to be only for the duration of the position in which the minister or deacon accepted a responsibility. In effect, he said that ordained ministers should be re-ordained by each church where they accepted a position. Binkley was currently going to re-ordain all former deacons who were reelected. This was so foreign to the concept of what ordination meant in the minds of some persons present that it created some serious consternation. Evidently, the membership was not aware of the differing views held by its leaders as to the meaning of ordination.

One criticism was made after the fact regarding the various group meetings observing that only the meeting of 22 March was announced in writing to the membership. The next meeting was set that night and the date and time of each successive meeting was set by the previous one. No further written announcements were made available to the membership during those two weeks. Members who did not attend the first one were not made aware of what was going on unless told by someone.

Sunday Night Meeting, March 29

At this meeting Jim Wells, as an individual member of Binkley, proposed a form which he hoped the vote on April 5 would take:

We are not all of one mind but we wish to be of one heart. Some of us at Binkley believe the practice of homosexuality is always sinful, while others of us believe that homosexuality can be practiced in life-affirming ways which are not sinful. The majority of us

— *a. affirm John Blevins' call to the Christian ministry and approve his request for licensure to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We will seek to support his pilgrimage to be in harmony with God's love just as we seek to support the pilgrimages of us all.*

— *b. reject John Blevins' request for licensure to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ because his practice of homosexuality makes approval of his request impossible. Still we love John and will seek to support his pilgrimage to be in harmony with God's love just as we will seek to support the pilgrimages of us all.*

Wells continued that his hope for after the vote would be that the membership would:

... together embark upon a process to develop understanding about the most loving and, therefore, the most responsible ways for single, heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual Christians to practice God's gift of sexuality. This process may or may not result in a majority statement but certainly could help inform us in our individual and collective efforts to be most nearly in harmony with God's Love.

Expressing his hope that this same process could be used for the members to inform themselves of the most loving and responsible ways they could use all their individual and collective resources, such as talent, energy, intellect and money, Wells added that none of these efforts may have an end, but be part of an on going process.

On March 31, the Church sent to the membership through the *Newsletter* excerpts from a May 1982 Binkley Church document entitled "Procedures and Policies Concerning Ordination" to help answer questions raised about the process of licensure and ordination. This did not resolve the different opinions expressed as to the meaning of these procedures, however.

Church Conference, April 5, 1992

The meeting began with the moderator requesting any reporters present to leave. He then introduced the parliamentarian hired for the evening and announced that he would take it upon himself as Moderator, to assume the responsibility for discussing the outcome of the evening with the press and asked that all members respect this position. He, thereupon, opened the proceedings with having the recommendation of the Diaconate placed on the floor. Some members observed a group sitting in the center area of the sanctuary that exhibited a certain excited cohesiveness which grew as the evening wore on and gave the impression of an organized political action group.

John Humber spoke to the divisiveness of the issue, entitling his remarks: *Binkley Church At A Crossroads, A Majority Moving Out On Its Own Or A Community Of Faith Moving Together*. He stated that there was no conceivable way, in his opinion, that in

licensing John Blevins the Church was not voicing its approval of homosexuality as an acceptable quality in a minister. To declare otherwise was extremely naive, although he realized that some advocates of licensure held the opinion that all Binkley was doing in approving the Diaconate's recommendation was simply licensing Blevins to preach the Gospel. Furthermore, dealing with the issue by being given only one option of voting for or against one person was patently unfair to the membership, for it placed many members in the untenable position of voting against someone they knew, cared for and did not wish to constrain or of quietly endorsing a life style to which they took exception.

By voting in this manner, Humber added, the Church set a precedent on the issue of homosexuality for which there existed no formulated church policy. When courts of law *make* rulings that set precedents, they *are* based on an interpretation of the Constitution. Binkley had no such organic document stating its beliefs in this matter. Additionally, he said, some persons for various reasons felt a pressure of time within which to act, but he believed that there were no time constraints which warranted juxtaposing the future of Binkley Church and what it stood for against the personal plans or requests of any single individual.

After pointing out some of the differing concepts expressed by various Binkley members as to the definition of licensure and ordination and the confusion generated by these varying ideas, he suggested that Binkley as a congregation should come to a uniform understanding of what these processes meant before licensing or ordaining anyone else. He asked, "Who's rules do we go by? Our own? Those of a set Baptist polity? American Baptist or Southern Baptist?"

Humber offered the opinion that there were two issues over which Binkley members would never likely reach unanimity: Whether homosexuality is a sin or not; and whether homosexuality results from genetic or environmental causes, or a combination of both. Furthermore, it was his perception that many members of Binkley Church were not involved in this discussion because they regarded the subject of homosexuality as offensive or embarrassing and simply did not wish to discuss such matters publicly at this juncture.

Pleading the case for a decision by the community of faith as opposed to that of a simple majority of those present and voting, and noting that over half of the resident members of Binkley Church were absent that evening, he said:

Do we want to take the time to bring all our members into a consideration of this issue? Such persons [who were not involved or who opposed the issue] cannot dismiss a lifetime of belief with a few weeks of educational therapy.

A majority vote by the congregation in disposing of these issues is not sufficient to deal with the beliefs of individual members. We cannot legislate opinion. We can only serve to alienate the minority, whatever position that might prove to be. If we are to continue as the loving and caring microcosm of God's World that we claim to be, then we must take it upon ourselves to find an answer to this issue

which leaves the belief systems of all our members unassailed , to find a common ground upon which we can unite. We can commit ourselves to continue exploring this issue , giving each other time to determine the difference between those principles which we cannot compromise and those policies wherein we can accommodate each other's points of view.

The consensus which we reach may represent more than some wish to accept and less that others desire to achieve. But at least we will be moving forward together , not dividing into antagonistic factions.

Thereupon , Humber presented the following substitute motion to the Diaconate's recommendation:

Whereas it is recognized that the issue of homosexuality and its place within the church is the main issue before this Congregation , not the licensure of John Blevins , and

Whereas the issue of homosexuality and other interrelated issues regarding sexuality have very serious and far reaching implications to the individual faith and beliefs of the members of Binkley Congregation , and

Whereas Binkley Church has not instructed its officers , representatives or staff as to any policy regarding the issue of homosexuality and its relationship to Faith , Theology , Biblical interpretation or the application of such interpretation , and

Whereas the opinions held among the membership on this issue are so widely divergent so as to make it virtually impossible to make a decision on the licensure without alienating a large portion of the membership at this time , and

Whereas there exists an ambiguity and general lack of agreement among the membership as to what the process of licensure and ordination into the ministry truly means or as to what the duties and responsibilities assumed by persons so designated may be ,

It is therefore the express will of Binkley Church In Conference that its Diaconate's recommendation to approve the licensure request of John Blevins be deferred until:

- 1 . A policy statement is prepared by the Diaconate and agreed to by the Church In Conference as to what this Church is doing when it licenses or ordains anyone to the ministry , including agreement as to the duties and responsibilities as well as the rights and privileges such persons accept*

within our Baptist denomination, and

2. *A statement of belief and policy is prepared by the diaconate and agreed to by the Church In Conference regarding:*

- a. The role and place of homosexuality within the church,*
- b. Its relative place in the public forum and the private domain, and*
- c. The role of this issue in the acceptance of members and the selection of leaders within our community of faith.*

As discussion ensued some of the supporters of licensure began calling on opponents to the issue "to sit down and be quiet; we've heard all that before." Some friendships of 40 years standing were ruptured that night. The question was called and the substitute motion was voted down. No numbers were kept on the vote as the Moderator quit counting after the number of opposing votes exceeded those supporting the motion. There were 266 members present at the opening of the meeting. The mood in certain areas of the sanctuary began to grow rather animated as if a major hurdle had been eliminated.

Next, Jim Wilde presented an amendment to the Diaconate's recommendation to approve the licensure of John Blevins. It consisted of a set of eight statements offered as a statement of belief on the sexuality issue by Binkley Church. No one attending the meeting had seen this document before Wilde passed out copies at the beginning of the meeting. And, there were insufficient copies for everyone present to obtain one. It was later learned, and acknowledged by Wilde, that only the Senior Minister, Associate Minister and Church Moderator had known of the preface's existence or had even read it before the meeting. In retrospect, Wilde said that he had thought that by introducing this document, it would slow down the vote on licensure and extend the discussion period. He was quite surprised when it was accepted into the main motion.

Mike Berkut offered an amendment to strike the last sentence of the seventh paragraph which had stated: "It would be moral and should be legal for such a relationship to include intimate sexual behavior." Berkut said:

Who is to say in the face of what's written in the Bible that a sexual relationship between two men in bed is a moral act when the Bible speaks specifically against sexual behavior of this nature?

Berkut's motion was passed and the paragraph was accepted as shown below.

After one or two other modifications and some further attempts at discussion, while some members were still trying to be recognized in order to object to the wording and intent of certain parts of the document, someone moved the question, and that motion carried. This cut off all debate and the main question on the adoption of the preface was then put to a vote. It was passed by a vote of 142 for and 87 against, with 36 abstaining. The preface as passed read as follows:

We, the members of the Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church, assembled on April 5, 1992, express our support for the following statements. They are intended not to imply unanimity or to enforce conformity, but to inform others about the context in which our decisions are being made.

We praise God for all creation - the sea, the earth and the heavens, the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, every kind of animal and plant life, and male and female humanity, whose sexuality enables God's creation to be extended from generation to generation.

We praise God for the gift of sexuality, which along with our other human qualities presents the potential for good or evil use. We are especially thankful that God sent Jesus to us with the Gospel of Love, from which we can learn our Creator's intention for the redemptive use of all our faculties.

Jesus said: 'Come unto me, all who are weak and heavy-laden, and I will refresh you.' As a community of Christians, we recognize that we are sinners. We welcome as members of this church all who accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, regardless of sexual orientation. Both heterosexual and homosexual persons are humanly capable of sinfulness in their relationships with others by choosing to be selfish, exploitive, intimidating and disrespectful. But ours is a loving God, who can relieve us of the burden of these and other sins through God's forgiving grace.

We believe that sexual intimacy should be confined to relationships which are loving, enduring, committed, and responsible. We are thankful for the blessing of marriage, wherein a woman and a man pledge their faithfulness to God and to one another and in which the community of faith affirms its support of this commitment. This marital union provides the opportunity for the two partners to use their sexuality to reaffirm and renew their love and life-affirming covenant.

We recognize that all human beings, regardless of sexual orientation, seek love, acceptance and support of others. Our individual uniqueness results in a wide variety of lifestyles as we search for our own humanity. As a majority group, heterosexuals have found many different ways of gaining acceptance. As a minority group, homosexuals have been subjected to a wide range of discrimination, harassment, misunderstanding, intimidation and violence. These reactions by heterosexuals are clearly contrary to the commandment to 'love your neighbor as yourself.' Moreover, they greatly restrict the ability of lesbians and gay men to form the life-affirming relationships that we all desire.

We therefore commit ourselves as a community of Christians to ask God's guidance in helping us find a means of allowing homosexual men and women to pledge their faithfulness to God and to a same-sex partner within a loving, faithful and life long relationship. Such a permanent, selfless and monogamous covenant can truly promote the good of both partners and deserves the support and encouragement of God's people.

The Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church, when it calls persons to pastoral leadership and when it considers requests for licensure or ordination to the Christian ministry, shall disregard the sexual orientation of those under consideration. It shall expect that, while all human beings are weak and prone to sinfulness, members and ordained leaders alike will strive for behavior which conforms to the Gospel of Love.

The ruling majority of the evening now seemed to feel they were on a roll and that nothing could stop them, judging from the conduct of persons on certain sections of the floor. Due to the growing lateness of the hour, the increasing restlessness of people enduring a long meeting and the family responsibilities faced by some, an attempt was made to adjourn and continue the meeting another night. This motion, however, was defeated. A mood of wanting "to get this thing over with" seemed to spread. One member, who favored licensure but opposed the preface as something beyond the scope anticipated at this meeting, later recalled his feeling at the time: "Oh. well! In for a penny, in for a pound," and voted for the licensure and preface.

One person proposed that the members all trust each other to only vote if eligible, and this was accepted by the congregation. It is rather difficult to stand up and publicly argue against a suggestion that people trust each other under such circumstances; however, some members believed that the Moderator should have maintained accurate control over the issuing of ballots. Some persons later wrote to object to the waiving of the registration of members prior to voting.

The main question was called and the written ballot vote was taken, yielding 145 to 107 in favor of the licensure. This reflected 57.5% in favor and 42.5% opposed of the 252 persons then present and voting, 14 members having already left by that time.

The above percentages were often quoted in succeeding days as reflecting the church's position on the licensure. These figures provide a distorted view of the Church's true position, ignoring the fact that the majority of the Church's resident membership were not even present that evening. The accurate comparison of the church's position on this vote with its entire resident membership is: 26.7% for, 19.7% against and 53.6% absent from the meeting.

After the vote another motion was quickly voiced by Martha Henderson which stated: "Binkley Church pledges to continue study and discussion of responsible Christian sexuality." It was passed by a voice vote.

Reactions After The April 5th Vote

As the membership was leaving the sanctuary after the meeting adjourned, one exchange between two members summarized the feeling, although perhaps for differing reasons, of a number of those who had voted against licensure. John Stokes said to Jim Cansler as they met in the narthex, "Well, Jim, we lost the vote." Cansler replied, "No, John. We lost a Church."

It was at that same moment that the deaf membership in attendance approached Sandra Stokes, who had begun and directed Binkley's deaf ministry since 1977, and simply told her that they would not be back.

In his letter of resignation from Binkley Church on April 12, John Lotz, who had been a member for over 15 years, expressed the opinion of many who opposed licensure:

We have fallen prey to the 'spirit of the age' with its persistent lack of absolutes and its affirmation of lifestyles contrary to the Gospel. Instead of calling our generation of students to a holy life worthy of the Gospel, we have patted sin on the back and made it comfortable, indeed an acceptable lifestyle. Such a church lacks the ability to witness to this generation.

On May 4, 1992 at its regular session the Diaconate authorized the formation of a Diaconate committee on Faith And Sexuality Concerns to serve as a focal point of the church's resolution passed on April 5, 1992, to continue the study and discussion of responsible Christian sexuality.

Mike Berkut, a founding member of Binkley Church and a Professor Emeritus in the Department of Biochemistry and Biophysics at the University of North Carolina with a specialization in the biochemistry of endocrinology, wrote an open letter to the membership on May 4 in which he said in part:

Science has not substantiated with irrefutable evidence the reasons for human orientation towards homosexuality. Scientific and professional groups are divided among the possibilities that genetic, biochemical, environmental or social prochoice influences are the basis for homosexual orientation. As a biochemist it is my conjecture that biochemical humoral factors during puberty, influenced by genetic predisposition, may lead toward homosexuality.

He saw homosexual behavior, however, as an aberration of natural behavior and graphically states: "It is a disgusting and an abhorring inference in the 'Preface' adopted by the Church Conference on April 5! that penile penetrations of the anal orifices between sexually active gay men is equated to God's gift of sexuality between that of a husband and wife." In upholding the traditional Biblical view of homosexual practice as sinful, he said that:

... a Christian church should not be heretically betrayed to accept secular lifestyle preferences and thus be led to burden the guilt of scriptural

transgressions. . . . Will felonious sexual transgressions in the future be defended as overwhelming emotional expression of 'God's Love'? What will be the format for the study of the subject of Christian Sexuality among homosexually active males that Binkley Church now proposes? It was unconscionable that a strongly family oriented church such as Binkley would be requested to approve publicly sexual intimacy among homosexual males as being 'moral' and that such sexual intimacy should be 'legalized.' It was equally surprising to witness so many members vote to retain these items within the aforementioned eight-point 'Preface' after a motion was made to delete them.

Berkut called for the Baptists of North Carolina to be told that 54% of the resident members were absent on April 5th and were disenfranchised by the lack of an absentee balloting procedure, a deficiency which the leadership did not anticipate as being unfair. He pointed out that no group was organized to defeat the motion for licensure, the opposition merely functioning as individuals voting their conscience. He also indicated the disparity between the length of time taken by the Diaconate to study the issue and short time accorded to the membership to debate it. He concluded with a question:

With the increase of promiscuity in our society, how can a church in fostering moral values condone behavior associated with immorality in its own spiritual leadership?

Jim Wells, as retiring Chair of the Diaconate, wrote an open letter to the membership on May 6th, acknowledging "a serious rift in our family of faith." He said:

This concerns me greatly because I believe our discord is keeping us from getting the love and support we need from each other.

I am writing now to everyone asking that we put down our verbal weapons and lower our defensive shields. I sincerely believe that we are capable of talking with one another as friends who disagree about issues relating to homosexuality, but who strongly agree that Jesus' way of love reflects most clearly God's will for us.

If we believe our democratic polity has been abused, we will do well to talk with one another about our feelings and thoughts, for usually we can understand our differing perspectives if we patiently listen to one another. I believe that the greatest danger in our current discord is that we will persist in fighting or fleeing, two very natural reactions to a perceived threat or injustice. I hope we can resist or reverse these responses and strive to achieve mutual understanding and peace.

If while serving as you Diaconate chairperson I offended you, abused my position, or failed us through my actions or inactions, I am truly sorry and request your forgiveness. Though I have personal opinions about the issues relating to homosexuality, I tried to be fair and loving throughout our process of deliberations. I am sure, however, that there were times when I was perceived as neither.

After reiterating his belief that the Church made the right decision in granting Blevins licensure, he added:

Many of you do not share my believe and grieve for the loss of a congregation which takes stands you believe incorrect. Others of you may feel strongly that regardless of the decision outcome, we went about making it the wrong way. Perhaps we should have postponed a decision until more study and discussion could take place, though on April 5 I could not see that more discussion would likely change many positions whether for or against the proposal. I respect, however, everyone's opinions and can understand how each position might have been reached. I can also imagine that those whose positions did not prevail may feel frustrated, hurt, and angry.

I hope that in spite of our feelings we can stretch to understanding one another and reach out to one another in love. Nothing can separate us from God's love except the barriers we erect within ourselves. Resentments and grudges are just such barriers. They are like bolted doors which prevent us from being open to God's healing love. If we relinquish our resentments and put aside our grudges, we are in essence unlocking the doors to our hearts where God has been patiently knocking. If we have made wrong decisions of any kind, we can be restored to harmony with God's will and purpose through our receptivity to God's love and guidance.

The events occurring after the vote on April 5, 1992, show quite dramatically that Binkley was a church divided with a probably irreconcilable polarity. On May 6, the new Moderator, Forrest Page, and the Budget Director, Rachel Dedmon, told the congregation that the church had experienced a "reduction in expected income" Some members had made a change in their pledges and, combined with the original difference between anticipated income and the budget, the church is experiencing a 15% shortfall. No mention was made as to why members were making changes in their pledges or the numbers of people involved. This, in fact, had been going on since January when some members refused to pledge or withheld payments of their pledges pending a resolution to their unaddressed problems with the leadership of the church. The vote by the Diaconate and later the church conference merely exacerbated the problem.

Joe Buckwalter reacted to the Page/Dedmon letter by writing Page on May 7th referring to a letter he had written on April 7, 1992, and to which he had received no

answer. He stated that in his earlier letter he had commented on the inappropriateness of the preface and now understood that it may have been unconstitutional. He also disapproved of the process used to obtain a vote on the licensure, which provided no opportunity for absentee voting and no registration of those who did vote. He wanted to stress to the council and diaconate that these were important issues to him and others who want to remain at Binkley and a resolution of these issues is needed to restore the credibility of the church leadership. The Page/Dedmon letter, he observed, reflected the financial implication of those unfortunate errors.

Meanwhile, three deacons called for a meeting at the Church on May 3 as a support group for those persons who voted against the April 5th decision. Some forty persons attended and for three hours they listened to each other, to their feelings of anger and betrayal, of sorrow and frustration over the virtual destruction of their church. It was a shared time which most present sadly realized would likely be their last together as a family of faith.

John Blevins' Interview With The *Chapel Hill Herald*

An article by Mark Schultz in the *Chapel Hill Herald* (May 17, 1992) stated:

The licensure decision . . . came only after months of internal discussion. Some congregation members tried to postpone the April 5 vote, saying the church was rushing its decision and needed to agree on homosexuality before deciding on an individual request.

The morning after the vote, Blevins appeared beside church officials in a conservative blue jacket and tie. He answered questions from a dozen reporters with little emotion and repeated phrases almost as if he'd rehearsed them.

A few weeks later, Schultz interviewed Blevins in the Binkley Church courtyard where he was relaxed and smiling. Blevins said:

"I know the process wouldn't have happened if I didn't ask for licensure, and I know that process has caused some people to leave. But what has happened is a corporate decision of this church saying, 'This is what we think.'

"I can understand the fears," Blevins added. "It took me about nine years to come to the point I could do what's happened here." After speaking about his childhood and his growing awareness of his homosexuality, he spoke of his entry at Duke University Divinity School and "feeling embattled" a great deal of the time. One teacher told him he should shift to an academic program for he would never be ordained. He then told about meeting with other gay and lesbians by his second semester at Duke University and in his second year they formed the Students For Gay and Lesbian Concerns. About 30 persons attending the first meeting, but he said it became clear "a lot of the people there came to find out how they could help the homosexual." According to Blevins, this

meeting touched off a "firestorm" in the divinity school.

When asked why he took on the role of an activist in this area, he answered he never considered himself as an activist. He said: "I consider activists as people who wear black and dreadlocks and I'm just a preppy guy wearing my pleated shorts."

After attending Pullen Baptist Church in Raleigh during the summer of 1990, he shifted to Binkley Church, about which he had learned from a friend. He began attending in the Fall after university classes began because it was harder to drive to Raleigh and maintain other commitments. He said he felt immediately at home. Three months after he joined Binkley Church, on December 16, 1991, he told the Senior Minister, Linda Jordan, that he was gay and he wanted to become an ordained minister.

Blevins added in the wake of the vote on licensure, "On some level I've caused some people a lot of heartache, but finally the decision is a shared one." Schultz observed that "If Blevins has any heartache, however, he's keeping it to himself." In a later interview in the *Chapel Hill Herald* (11 June 1992) Blevins indicated that he was born and raised in a Southern Baptist Church, attended a Baptist college and had been as active in the church as anyone. He concluded, "That is the tradition that nurtured me and allowed me to do what I did at Binkley. I don't regret that."

Attempts To Recover The Church

Out of that meeting came an appeal to the Church Council to declare the preface passed with the licensure motion unconstitutional by virtue of the failure to give sufficient advance notice of the nature and content of that statement. It was also suggested that any vote taken involving the preface should also be declared unconstitutional, which included the vote for the licensure motion to which the preface had been attached. Sixty six members signed the petition, even though only one signature was necessary. John Humber also submitted to the Council a proposal to change the voting procedure by establishing a mail-in ballot for all policy making decisions that established purpose and direction to the church. His cover letter explained that it was believed there was only one chance for the Binkley Church to survive this crisis intact. That was to return to the situation as it existed prior to the vote on April 5th by rescinding both the preface and the licensure, to change the voting policy in order to enfranchise the 54% of the congregation who were absent, and then to deal with a Statement of Belief on the issue before returning to a vote on the licensure.

In the belief that the Church members needed to talk to each other openly about the various hard feelings which had been generated over the licensure vote and the process perceived by many to have been responsible for the outcome, the Council called for a general Church meeting on May 17th, announced as one where only discussion would take place. It was structured, however, by the Moderator, Forrest Page, who asked for and wrote down a list of those emotions people were then feeling. These included:

Mistrust, anxiety, fear and manipulation

Anger

Concern

Aloneness

Frustration

Disappointment

Resentment

Embarrassment

Confusion

Hurt

Tiredness

A "lack of listening to each other"

Selecting anger and mistrust as the two emotions people considered most important at the moment, Page asked that members identify their reasons for feeling this way. Among those reasons cited were:

Lack of communication by the Diaconate with the membership.

People leaving Binkley.

Stifled voting process.

Personal conflict: Blame-laying, negativism, fingerpointing.

The "Preface" and the way it was adopted.

Hidden political agendas.

Again people were limited to the identification of reasons and not permitted any discussion which caused a general feeling of frustration at being interrupted before they could complete the thoughts they had on their mind. However, by limiting the participation of individuals more people were thereby given an opportunity to vent some of their feelings than would have otherwise been possible. After some heated interchanges the meeting ended with nothing more accomplished than the feeling by some that a start may have been made to heal the breach. Additional meetings were called for, and another meeting was understood to be forthcoming, although no date was set. As of July 15, 1992, no further plans have been announced by the leadership for holding any additional sessions of this nature.

At its meeting the following day, May 18, 1992, the Council dealt with the petition challenging the constitutionality of the preface. The Moderator, on the strength of what the parliamentarian told him, said that to declare the motion unconstitutional, a point of order should have been raised on the night of the vote with the appeal heard by the Council that night gathered in a special meeting for that purpose while the Church Conference was held waiting. No one on the Council appeared to know this and the procedure had not been spelled out in the constitution or the procedural materials sent in advance of April 5th to the congregation. Roberts Rules of Order being named in the Constitution as the standard operating procedure for conducting meetings, and the fact that the preface was not introduced as a separate motion but as an amendment to the main motion, seemed to be sufficient reasons to the Council, however, to rule the vote and motions of the 5th in order and constitutional.

A discussion was then held on a proposal made by a Council member to recommend to the Church Conference what had been intended to be accomplished by the declaration of unconstitutionality, namely that the church rescind both the licensure motion and the preface, pass a constitutional amendment to modify the voting process, and then return to the vote at a date set in the near future. At this point the Moderator reported the parliamentarian had rendered his opinion that the vote to license was a contract and a contract could not be rescinded. No one present suggested that if there were a contract it might be considered the license when signed and issued, not a congregational vote authorizing the issue of the license.

In his letter to the membership on May 20, 1992, reporting the actions of that Council meeting, the Moderator indicated that "The Council did not choose to rule on a point of order after the motion had been acted on by the greater authority of the Church in conference." This brings into focus a question of whether the Constitution is of any value to the Church at all if the Church In Conference can act independently of it at will. The Council was split down the middle in a vote of 6 to 5 to proceed with the licensing ceremony on 24 April. However, the Council voted unanimously to recommend to the Church Conference that it repeal the preface. June 14, 1992, was set as the date for a Church Conference to make this recommendation.

On May 20, 1992, on the recommendation of a 9 to 8 vote of the Executive Committee, the General Board of the North Carolina Baptist Convention voted 58 to 29 (67% to 33%) to refuse contributions from any church which "manifests public approval, promotion or blessing of homosexuality." This, in effect, disqualified any such church as a cooperating church in the Convention, excluding it from affiliation with the North Carolina Baptist Convention. Both Binkley Baptist Church and Pullen Memorial in Raleigh were thereby removed from this association unless the decision would be reversed by the State Baptist Convention in November, 1992, which, of course, is not expected to happen.

Linda Jordan issued a press release regarding this decision by the General Board saying that several of the Church's leaders and some of the leaders of the State Convention had met and expressed their mutual concerns to each other. Each respected the views of the other and Binkley Church regrets their decision. "However, I certainly respect their decision and their right to make that decision. Our church family had to make a decision which we felt was best for ourselves. Part of decision-making is accepting the consequences -- both good and bad -- of that decision." She concluded, "I have never felt a mean spirit from the State Convention leadership, and I believe that they have made the decision they needed to, just as we did."

It should be noted that at no time during Binkley's discussions with the North Carolina Baptist Convention did its leadership inform the membership of what was going on and what the consequences would be of being excluded from the Convention. The membership had to learn of this through the newspapers and was provided no opportunity to react to this flow of events before the fact.

In the May 26, 1992, *Newsletter* the Church membership learned for the first time who had officially left Binkley since the April 5th vote. Two persons transferred to

another church, three asked removal from membership and six asked to have their membership changed to an inactive status. The recent concern of the Worship Committee with where to store the empty chairs in the sanctuary to make them less obvious speaks to the unofficial alienation of a much larger segment of the membership. The actual toll taken on congregational membership or simply on the active participation of its members will not be known for some months, perhaps not until new financial pledges are sought for next year's budget. Many persons have simply informed friends, "We won't be back."

On June 2, 1992, the new Chair of the Diaconate, Willis Whichard, sent a letter to the membership. He stated that the Council asked the Diaconate to join it in recommending to the Church In Conference that it voluntarily rescind the "Preface", an action which would make it unnecessary for the Council to pass upon the constitutional challenge. The Diaconate met on June 1 primarily to discuss this question and voted with 1 negative vote to join the Council in this recommendation. He added:

I believe it is accurate to state that both the Council and the Diaconate view of this recommendation as reflecting no position on the merits or demerits of either the 'Preface' itself or the purely literal constitutionality of the method by which it was adopted. It reflects, instead, a concern for the spirit and intent of the one week notice requirement of our constitution and for perceptions of fairness in the methods by which we process major congregational decisions.

Additionally, Whichard informed the membership of the resignations of 7 deacons and requested support on June 14 for the proposed constitutional amendment which would permit the Church to fill these vacancies from persons nominated but not elected at the last election. At least three persons have resigned from the Council.

The Southern Baptist Convention voted by a show of hands on June 9, 1992, to bar any churches that "affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior." Pullen and Binkley were "withdrawn from fellowship" with an even larger majority.

Based upon the recommendation of the Church Council and the Diaconate, with one negative vote, a Church Conference was called on June 14th to act on the repeal of the "Preface" passed on the night of April 5th. The first action taken was the adoption of a constitutional amendment empowering the church to fill vacancies occurring in the Diaconate between elections. Such authority was deemed necessary due to the 7 deacons who had by now resigned. This passed 169 to 1 after some discussion revolving around whether the Council or Diaconate could have some option over whether to fill the vacancies or not.

The second measure of the evening did rescind the "Preface" by a vote of 151 to 24, adding to the motion that this action was taken

... on the basis of procedural concerns and a sense of fairness over and above a strict legal interpretation of the constitution. The Council recommends this action wholly apart from the merits of the content of the 'Preface'.

This made it quite clear that the repeal was not because of the content of the "preface," but strictly due to the process by which it was adopted. An amendment introduced by Jim Wells failed to pass that would have temporarily set the preface aside and reinstated it in a year's time if it had not been replaced with another statement by that time.

THE TRAGEDY OF BINKLEY BAPTIST CHURCH

Over the past year Binkley Memorial Baptist Church has experienced a profound rupture among its membership. The basic issue involved the acceptability of homosexuals as clergy within the Baptist denomination. This issue was, indeed, the catalyst which came to reveal a variety of opinions among the members regarding attitudes towards homosexuality in general. However, there have been other underlying issues exposed in the process which have been even more pervasive in the polarization of the membership and the ultimate alienation of a large segment of the congregation. An attempt is made below to attain a perspective on these issues and come to some understanding as to why this tragedy has happened.

The Homosexuality Issue

The issue of homosexuality assumed several different levels of definition in the understanding of church members. A general description of the range of these positions is presented below:

1. Opposed homosexuality on any terms as sinful under Biblical dictum, but accepted homosexual persons as members of the church like any other sinner.
2. Recognized homosexuality as a lifestyle choice, but opposed homosexual behavior under any terms.
3. Accepted homosexual orientation as a programmed condition due to genetic and/or environmental conditioning, but opposed homosexual behavior.
4. Accepted homosexual orientation as a programmed condition due to genetic and/or environmental conditioning and accepted homosexual behavior under one of the following conditions:
 - a. A permanent, mutually committed monogamous relationship.
 - b. A monogamous relationship subject to change, like divorce among heterosexuals.
 - c. A temporary relationship which is considered beneficial by both partners for such duration as they deem desirable.

It has always been freely admitted by the Binkley membership that if sinners were prohibited from joining the church, there would be no church members at all. Binkley Church has, therefore, never made a case for or against accepting homosexuals as church members any more than it has ever made a case for or against accepting heterosexuals. The issue has never been openly discussed. A need to generate such a policy has never been expressed.

However, in discussing the issue of licensing a gay man to the ministry, a segment of the membership disclosed their belief that increasingly more stringent standards of moral conduct should be required of lay leaders and ordained ministers. Church leaders were viewed by such persons as serving as role models for others and should, therefore, be willing and able to try to serve the community of faith by setting an example for those who chose them.

Some members, however, saw no difference at all between the conduct expected from members, lay leaders or ministers; and, if homosexual conduct was acceptable for one, it should also be acceptable for the others. Most persons did not consider promiscuous conduct as acceptable or excused, but, whatever the level of behavior deemed permissible by members, most agreed that there should not be a double standard applied to behavior by homosexual and heterosexual persons.

Due to this existing blend of perceptions and beliefs maintained by various groups of members, a great disservice to the Church was rendered by those who implied that by voting for or against licensure a person declared themselves to be for or against the acceptance and inclusion of homosexual persons. This clouded the issue and caused confusion in many minds as to what the church was actually trying to decide. It was a simplistic pressure tactic that was aimed at forcing people to agree with a supportive position or else be considered as discriminatory and bigoted. Persons in the pro-licensure faction who voiced such opinions seemed to assume that disagreement with their point of view had to be prejudicial and intolerant in nature. An emotionally charged complication was thereby introduced into the issue.

Science vs. The Scriptures

The most soul searching question in this entire episode was voiced by a seventeen year old youth member: "How do you determine what part of the Bible you accept and what part you are able to reject?" Therein lay a deep and disturbing dilemma which eventually drove a wedge into Binkley Church's membership. This issue of Biblical interpretation to be used as a guide by Christians in their daily lives is becoming an increasingly divisive factor among Baptists and other denominations nationwide.

Just as there were various levels of definition encountered in dealing with the issue of homosexuality, there existed various degrees of belief as to how one should interpret the scriptures. These various methods of Biblical interpretation could be generally classified as follows:

1. Literal Biblical fundamentalist interpretation, regarding homosexual behavior as sin.
2. Literal interpretations of selected passages (ie. acceptance of Paul's condemnation of homosexual activity) and historically adjusted interpretations on others (ie. rejection of the prohibition against women cutting their hair).
3. Historically adjusted interpretations on all questions (ie. the Biblical definition of adultery vs. today's interpretation)
4. Rejection of passages as irrelevant which conflict with currently accepted social thought or preferred scientific proofs (ie. Paul is not a legitimate guide for us today).
5. Outright questioning of some of the basic Christian tenets (ie. the virgin birth and even the resurrection).

From these various approaches to scriptural interpretation, members could have debated the "truth of the matter" forever and never have reached agreement, let alone unanimity. And, many people would find themselves in agreement with one or another

of these interpretative methods when dealing with different subjects.

For those members who were genuinely trying to come to some clear understanding of the issue, some people provided a disservice by interchangeably utilizing such terms as "sexual preference", "sexually active", "homosexual orientation", and "homosexual practice" or "behavior." Furthermore, it was an embarrassment to many members to discuss the meanings of these terms with anyone in public and, in many cases, even at home.

It was equally a disservice to the Church for some to equate opposition to licensure with the exclusion of homosexual persons from God's love, or to equate the inclusion of homosexual persons in church membership as necessarily endorsing homosexual behavior. When one simply stated that he or she believed homosexual practice was a sin, that was not a discriminatory statement, but merely an expression of opinion or belief for which individuals had a right to demand respect. And this was not always accorded to them by those who believed that homosexuality was not a sin. The attempt to reduce the influence of Biblical passages on some members by referring to the Christian Old Testament only as the Jewish Torah, thereby attempting to impute it with a spurious validity in the Christian world, was a rhetorical device which only served to further confuse and divide members in their points of view and lower mutual respect.

In the Baptist community of faith the degree to which historical interpretive adjustments should or should not be made in order to understand the "true" Word of God as revealed through the Scriptures should always remain a matter between individuals, their conscience and their God. It is unfortunate that sometimes people appear to use this authority as self-serving justification to urge upon others their own preconceived ideas as to how "things really are." This kind of belligerent attitude reduces any attempt at genuine discussion to an unproductive level of political banter. The bottom line, as one member expressed it, is simply whether or not one considers homosexual behavior to be a sin. That, in the final analysis, seems to be the crux of the issue.

The Concept of Ordination

An additional difference of opinion stemmed from conflicting views over what licensure or ordination means. It was fairly uniformly accepted that licensure was effectively an authorization by this church for the licensee to preach the Gospel for a limited time of 4 years; and, that it meant this church intended to support the licensee for ordination at a later time. There were considerable differences of opinion among ordained ministers, however, as to whether or not a licensee could perform a marriage.

As to the meaning of ordination, the perception at one extreme considered it to be a right to be demanded by virtue of one's being a member of the church and claiming to have received a call to the ministry from God; that is, the church had no right to deny what God had already decided by issuing a call to that individual. The view from the other extreme considered that it was a privilege to be granted only to those considered worthy by a church which was then willing to endorse them. Logic would seem to suggest that if individuals need the approval of a group of people, in this case that of a

church, for ordination, then a value judgment is being called for. If a judgment is being called for then the outcome is obviously not a foregone conclusion; otherwise, candidates could simply ordain themselves and go about God's business when and as they wished without anyone's blessing.

Binkley Church assumed a motto many years ago: "Every Member A Minister." In the opinion of many members this originally meant that we, as church members, ministered to each other as a church family in our times of need. This concept has been changed by some members to reflect little if any difference between the meaning of being a member, a deacon or an ordained minister of a church. One leader of the pro-licensure faction said: "If a church judges a homosexual is not qualified to be an ordained minister, logic demands that such a person is not qualified to hold any office or perform any service in the church. Which means such a person is not qualified to be a member." The opposite position, stated by a deacon who viewed homosexual practice as a sin, was expressed by saying that it is true all people are sinners, but leaders of the church should be persons who do not intend to continue to sin.

Another difference as to the meaning of ordination was reflected by the length of time for which someone was considered to remain ordained. Over the years, once ordained as a deacon at Binkley Church, one was considered to always remain ordained, even if not currently serving as a deacon, and did not go through a second ordination service if reelected to the diaconate at a later time. Former deacons were invited to participate in the Laying On Of Hands ceremony for deacons elected for the first time. Somewhere along the line it was decided that deacons were only ordained for the three year term to which they were elected. And, during the licensure controversy of 1992, it was announced that, hereafter, all former deacons would have to be re-ordained when reelected, and anyone in the church could participate in the Laying On Of Hands if they wished. Some persons have even gone so far as to say that the ordination of a minister is only effective for the period of time he or she serves in the specific position for which ordination was authorized and celebrated. It was specifically added that with each new call to a different church a minister should be re-ordained. One person explained in a meeting that Binkley had more freedom than most churches in deciding this issue for itself since it was not a member of the local Baptist association which normally had a voice in the ordination process.

There exists, therefore, a wide difference of opinion between Binkley members as to the meaning of ordination and to some degree, licensure. It would seem that the principle of local autonomy for a Baptist church begins to have a diminished meaning if its use provides a church with completely unbridled freedom to create its own definitions without regard to any denominational traditions and values. If, as one Binkley member maintains, "there is no difference between 'ministry' and 'service' in the Church," "every member of the Church is called upon to serve/minister," and "our baptism is our ordination to service," then why do we ordain anyone? What is the meaning of ordination? Is there no generally accepted understanding or agreement among Baptists as to what ordination means, what the Laying On Of Hands signifies? Certainly, the leadership of Binkley Baptist Church never adequately resolved, or even attempted to

resolve, these questions which were raised in the minds of its membership, and vocally expressed at open meetings, before leading the church to a vote on the licensure of John Blevins.

Perhaps there is more unanimity among Baptist clergy generally as to these definitions than has been revealed in the differing opinions of lay and ordained members of Binkley Church during this controversy. However, confusion still resides among the membership of this church not only as to what it is that Binkley actually did in licensing John Blevins, but also as to what it has meant to do over the years in ordaining the nearly thirty persons whom it has sent out into the ministry. This congregation needs to come to a consensus on this issue before taking any additional steps in this area.

Politics And Leadership

In the process of being led towards taking a stand on the homosexual issue, considering all of the sophisticated intellectual refinements which various members expressed at one time or another, a polarity inevitably developed between the two emerging and opposing points of view. It soon became obvious to all members that the Chair of the Diaconate and the Senior Minister both actively supported, or at the very least, strongly favored licensure. During the past year the great preponderance of those printed materials on homosexuality made available in the church library, all guest speakers, sermons, seminars, and Church School classes presented on the subject, supported, or intended to support, the full acceptance of homosexuality as a natural lifestyle for some people. It is no wonder that the process used by the leadership became viewed as flawed by a large segment of the membership. Any claim to presenting a balanced study of the issue by the leadership can be considered at best as self-deluding. Credence has been given this perception by many members who described the process by such terms as "orchestrated", "railroaded", "managed", "manipulated", "educational therapy", "desensitization", "indoctrination", "being used", "hidden agendas" and even "political conspiracy."

One aggressive and unflattering characterization of Binkley Church which has been made is that of a socio-political institution with a religious face, at the expense of worship and Scriptural study. The feeling thereby reflected was that little of any significance has occurred in Binkley Church during the past year except a push for acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle. This perception has been especially directed towards a socially active group within the church, which for ten years or more has been regarded by many as seeking an opportunity to be on the cutting edge of some new radical public stand, statement or issue. As one member put it, "Binkley Church was meant to slay dragons." This group has been perceived as carefully planning its future, along with that of Binkley Church, within the semblance of a political campaign. The names of a certain circle of families associated with this particular group, whose members have consistently revolved through the Diaconate succeeding each other year after year, tends to strongly suggest this in the minds of those who have never attempted such political organization within the church or thought it necessary.

Obviously, there were many members who did not seek such opportunities for

“slaying dragons”, but neither did they shrink from handling tough issues when confronted by them. There were those who expressed their opinion that people had a right to choose what causes they wished to sponsor and actively cultivate without being made to feel un-Christian for not “going all out” in support of any issue that someone else decided to place in front of them. After all, everyone has their own personal priorities for which they wish to spend their limited time, energy and resources. And there is certainly no dearth of good causes acceptable for a major commitment among which Christians can choose. To spend the next year, two years or even five years, if need be, exploring our sexuality, as the Chair of the Diaconate put it, is not considered by many to be the primary reason for attending church; or, indeed the environment in which they wish to worship. This perception of the new direction and purpose of this church has caused many persons simply to fade away.

And, then, there were others who did not want to become embroiled in a major controversial debate, but only wished to worship quietly and involve themselves by helping to meet such local community needs as their energies and resources permitted.

The failure of the Binkley Church’s leadership during this time may be seen as three fold.

1. Failure To Deal With Members’ Perceptions - First of all, it failed to deal with negative and cautious perceptions held by many of its members, either on the issue, itself, or on the process it had established to guide the Church towards a decision on that issue. Either the leadership did not understand these perceptions or chose to ignore them, for they were certainly brought to their attention. The 60-70% of the congregation, which were reported to the Church Council on February 17, 1992, as being satisfied with the process and ready to vote, must surely reflect only the percentages of those persons whom some deacons actually did contact, for many people apparently were never reached. The strong reaction of the membership after April 5th tends to confirm this view, as does the absence of 54% of the church’s resident members on the announced night of the vote.

Even with the warnings expressed by various members and friends of the Church, the leadership certainly misjudged the depth to which these perceptions were held by a large segment of the membership. Some of the pro-licensure members admitted to being shocked by the reaction that set in after the April 5th vote. This refusal to deal with the perceptions voiced by some members gave rise to a question of leadership integrity and a crisis in confidence developed. There also evolved among some members a suspicion that a portion of the pro-licensure faction really wanted some of the opposition whom they considered “troublemakers” to leave the church and get out of the way. In fact, in one of the small group meetings one leading member of the congregation who supported the issue was heard to exclaim: “If you don’t agree with us, we will eject you!” That, in turn, laid the pro-licensure group open to the charge that their avowed concept of Christian inclusivity for all people was somewhat limited in scope.

Some of the Church leadership stated that people would understand more thoroughly the significance of the issue and make the “right” decision after they had been through the planned educational process. This concept was considered by many members as

simply insulting, revealing a total disrespect for their life-long beliefs and perspectives and an attitude which has hardened some members into opposition who might otherwise have been more open to another point of view. They felt as if their convictions were judged by the leadership and others to be in grievous error and, therefore, in need of serious remedial attention. Here, then, is where a fundamental intolerance for each others' points of view and beliefs began to grow between the two factions, preparing the way for a final break.

In his letter to the membership on May 6, 1992, although he reaffirmed his respect for everyone's opinions, the retiring Chair of the Diaconate expressed his belief that Binkley's "greatest danger in our current discord is that we will persist in fighting or fleeing, two very natural reactions to a perceived threat or injustice." Indeed, if an injustice has been done, why is fighting it a danger to the Church? Correcting an injustice would seem to make the Church all the stronger. After all, is that not what the pro-licensure group has been saying they were doing for the past year? Why did it now become a danger?

The Chair of the Diaconate also seemed to confuse the difference between "fleeing" and simply being forced to leave for a more congenial environment. The open affirmation by an organization of a principle that does violence to one's closely held beliefs simply will not permit such a person to remain in good conscience, regardless of whether or not the method by which that affirmation was reached is considered to be fair. By stating that he understood how persons whose position did not prevail can feel frustrated, hurt or angry, and adding that resentments and grudges are barriers that should be put aside as separating us from the love of God, he exhibited a rather patronizing attitude towards the fundamental beliefs of others who, like errant children, refuse to become reconciled. This rather benevolent intolerance by the leadership which advocated licensure is, in itself, one of the factors which has alienated so many members. It is seen as direct evidence of their failure to deal effectively with the perceptions of all the members.

2. Selective Leadership - Secondly, the leadership has laid itself open to the charge of having provided selective leadership. It is viewed as having provided effective leadership for only one portion of the membership, "providing" the material, events and opportunities for supporters of the issue, and "inviting suggestions," or "soliciting input" or "allowing for full expression" from dissenting points of view. This was tantamount to providing an *active* leadership for members who supported their positions and a *passive* leadership for those members of the opposition. The obvious result was a preponderance of opportunity for the supporting group, for as a socially conscious and active association they easily organized to achieve their goals.

It was also observed by both sides that few persons availed themselves of the opportunity to read the materials or listen to the tapes placed in the church library. However, the reasons why this method of dissemination was not effective were never addressed. One attempt to resolve this situation by the Chair of the Diaconate led him to reproduce for the membership a selection of articles representing both points of view which he placed in the narthex. However, only those members attending worship service

could obtain a copy.

Members opposing licensure were not organized, had developed no cohesiveness in terms of mutual understandings or shared positions. They had merely dealt with the issue on an individual basis and had relied upon their church leaders to "provide," as opposed to "invite," a balanced opportunity for all points of view to be heard, theirs included. This situation led to deep seated feelings of betrayal after the vote on April 5th when many members realized for the first time that there had been little or no effective leadership in place representing their interests in the planning of the "educational process" during the year.

Organized discussions among the membership did not start until March 22, two weeks before the day the recommendation of the Diaconate would be presented to the Church in Conference for a vote. The "educational process" had been going on for some nine months in the Diaconate, but without structured opportunity for discussion by either members of the Diaconate or the membership in general. Some deacons felt that little or no opportunities were provided for discussion or debating the issue at their meetings until the very end before their February vote, and some felt even that had been managed.

A sense of having to meet a deadline became more acute as the Spring moved on. One perception was that the Diaconate would change in May with ten deacons retiring and a decision should be made before the change in leadership. Another view was that John Blevins would graduate in May and that "we must act in good faith" towards him. Observations were made repeatedly with no effect on the Church's leadership that the future of Binkley Church was vastly more important than the personal schedules of any one individual, and that "acting in good faith" did not necessarily require a "yes" or "no" answer. An acceptable answer could simply be a statement to the effect that we can not reach a decision at this time because we are not sufficiently of a like mind on the issue. Such protestations fell on deaf ears.

Furthermore, those who supported licensure were generally more ready and willing to talk openly about sex, sexuality, homosexuality and all the facets and implications of this subject than those who opposed the issue. Many persons who opposed licensure or had as yet no opinion were not able to publicly deal with this subject, one which had always been considered by them as a sensitive, personal and very private matter. Associating with people who want to publicly discuss this part of their lives is a very new and strange phenomenon to many people. Over the previous nine months some people had in fact become sufficiently desensitized to the degree that they could talk about it, at least guardedly in a small discussion group. However, many adults with and without families were reluctant and uncomfortable with openly participating in this kind of discussion, and this fact was repeatedly pointed out by various persons. Many of the absent 54% of the resident members on April 5th most likely fall into this category of reluctant participants. They either had opinions on the issue and were afforded no means acceptable to them for expressing those opinions, or they were provided no method they could endure for exploring the issue. These persons were essentially left out in the cold by "the process."

3. Full Resident Membership Involvement - Thirdly, the leadership failed to provide a process whereby all resident members were guaranteed a voice in determining the future purpose, direction and character of their Church. The leadership did not stop the process in order to change the constitutional voting procedure and provide for absentee voting or by-mail balloting so as to insure the inclusion of anyone in the decision who could not be present for whatever reason. This, despite warnings by several persons that they must be extremely careful to ensure every member of the Church was involved in the decision of so controversial an issue, or members would leave. On the night of April 5th it was pointed out before the vote that over half the resident members were absent from the meeting.

There were numerous reasons for people being absent. The embarrassed, reluctant members mentioned above formed one group and may possibly reflect the largest percentage of absentees. Many absentees were probably reluctant to attend because they did not understand what the issue really was about and, therefore, were uncertain as to what they believed about it or what its significance was to the church. Some were absent because of work, travel, or lack of available transportation. Even though the offer was made to provide transportation by the Diaconate, some people, especially elderly persons, are reluctant or simply refuse to impose on other people, jealously guarding their independence. Still others were kept away for health reasons. For instance, Fred and Elizabeth Ellis are charter members of Binkley Church, having served the Church faithfully in all of its major positions of responsibility from the beginning, and Fred is serving today as one of the Church's three trustees. Because of their inability to attend long meetings for health reasons, they were not allowed to vote. And, of course, there were undoubtedly a few, as exist in all groups, who were simply uninterested and just deliberately remained uninvolved.

The response to this criticism after the fact by the leadership was that everybody had an equal chance to come and vote, and were all informed that the vote was being called on April 5th. They said they had to work within the system which had been provided them, that is the voting process prescribed by the Constitution defining a passing vote as a majority of those present and voting. From discussions held and requests made, a need for other options was made abundantly clear beforehand, but the leadership either elected not to stop the process and correct the situation or simply did not think it worthwhile. When the vote on building the sanctuary was taken in the early 1980's, itself a controversial issue within the church family, opportunity was made available for persons absent on the night of the vote to come by the church office and cast a written ballot during the ensuing week. Constitutional changes are now going to be belatedly considered by the Church Council to provide mail-in balloting options. But the proverbial barn door has already been slammed shut by many members on their way out.

Politics And The Church

The political reality at Binkley seems to be that for some members a sense of loyalty to smaller groups within the church became stronger than to the Binkley Church

community of faith as a whole. One long time member described such a group as a "church within a church." This is, indeed, a formula for self-destruction. After the vote on April 5th, some persons who voted for the licensure turned to others who had voted against it and said in what was perceived to be a triumphant manner: "Well, you won on the sanctuary, but we won this one!" They were referring to the divisive issue of whether to build a sanctuary or not, over which decision Binkley had struggled for some eight years. The meaning was clear. A political victory had been won and winning over the "sanctuary crowd" appeared to be the important point of the evening for some.

Pro-licensure members commented to other members who decided to leave the church after the vote that they, themselves, had not left the church when the sanctuary was built, so why should those members leave when they lost this vote on licensing a sexually active homosexual? They evidently did not understand all the various reasons which were driving members out of the fold. Neither did they understand the difference between a vote on a building program and one on a controversial issue addressing some fundamental Christian beliefs. One could oppose a building program and refuse to contribute to it, but as a member of a church one cannot divorce one's self from an officially endorsed statement of belief or purpose that one cannot personally affirm, except by leaving the fellowship.

The losers in the vote that evening were winners in one sense, for they remained true to their beliefs and did not bow to the social and political pressures exerted under an arbitrary environment of group therapy. The winners of the evening also remained true to their own beliefs, to be sure. However, they were losers in a different sense, for they were responsible for the deliberate destruction of a Church which had been very dear to the hearts and souls and daily lives of many people, one which had maintained a close cohesiveness among its members and former members over the years of its existence.

"Deliberate" destruction? After so many warnings, how else can it be viewed? And, it was so needless! Many persons who were alienated might well have approved of the licensure of John Blevins, given the chance, but their sense of fairness had called into question the motives and integrity of the leadership. While remaining true to their beliefs, why were they in such a hurry? Why was their loyalty to one person so much greater than to so many of their long time friends and fellow members that they felt compelled to act in spite of the impending disaster against which they had been amply warned? This is a burden these "winners" will have to bear, though there are some who clearly do not care. In any case, their victory would seem to be somewhat empty. Indeed, it may have actually set their cause back for their precipitous efforts. All they can in truth claim is a thin political victory. Where is the consensus or the will of a church when they failed to get 54% of the resident members to participate?

John Blevins, himself, has been criticized for not caring enough about his church and its members to withdraw his request when he observed that it was destroying the church for many of its people, a number of whom had been members there for 20 to 30 years or more and others who had never known another church home. In his interview with the *Chapel Hill Herald*, he acknowledged this fact, saying:

"I know the process wouldn't have happened if I didn't ask for licensure, and I know that process has caused some people to leave. . . . But what has happened is a corporate decision of this church saying, 'This is what we think.' . . . On some level I've caused some people a lot of heartache. . . . But finally the decision is a shared one."

The reporter concluded that "If Blevins has any heartache, however, he's keeping it to himself." In his sermon at Binkley, December, 29, 1991, Blevins admonished the Binkley congregation: "We must take care that the ground, the touchstone, for our actions comes from our response to God's call and not from a social, political agenda." Perhaps, when seeking support for his own agenda, the two appear to him as synonymous, for he was sufficiently pleased to accept a political decision imposed by only 27% of the membership and call it "a corporate decision of this church saying 'This is what we think.'" After the Southern Baptist Convention removed the Pullen and Binkley churches from affiliated membership, Blevins was quoted in the *Chapel Hill Herald* (11 June 1992) as saying that he was born and raised in a Southern Baptist Church, attended a Baptist college and had been as active in the church as anyone. He said, "That is the tradition that nurtured me and allowed me to do what I did at Binkley. I don't regret that."

While attending Duke Divinity School he has been characterized as a gay activist who helped to organize the Divinity Students For Gay And Lesbian Concerns. Additionally, he said that he was encouraged by a Duke Divinity School teacher to transfer into some other academic discipline because he would never be ordained. That, plus the fact he admits to being a member of Binkley Church for only three months before asking for ordination as a gay person, leaves him open to the suspicion by many that he simply found Binkley Church to be useful for his own ends, just as a group within the Church may have seen him as a means of furthering their own agenda. A comment by the Senior Minister, Linda Jordan, to a friend of the Church that the news of the Diaconate's vote in February had been leaked to the press by a Duke University student also tends to leave this an open question.

The Expanding Rift

In the first *Newsletter* (April 14, 1992) mailed after the April 5th vote there appeared open letters to the membership from both Jordan and Hoogerwerf. While recognizing "a mixture of feelings" about the vote on licensure and the fact that some members were leaving the Church, Jordan portrayed Binkley's dealing with this issue as "full participation of the church in a very relevant issue with high involvement and significant decision-making." It makes one wonder what definition is required to qualify for the "full participation" of a church.

Hoogerwerf spoke at length about courage and humility in the aftermath of the vote and said it was his observation that "the unity of this congregation, grounded in part in our shared family humility, lies much deeper than our agreement with each other on all details of Christian doctrine and the moral life." He added that "... being a

community, like a family in a car when you are lost, is being committed to the journey and the goal." If only, indeed, Binkley's leadership and those who so actively pursued passage of the licensure issue as "the goal" had committed themselves to remaining with "the family" for the full course of its journey!

The real tragedy of Binkley Baptist Church was that its members had lost their spontaneous ability cultivated over the years to respect each others points of view and arrive at an accommodation on difficult issues wherein they could all live supporting each other, agreeing to disagree. This sense of community and caring is easily recalled from earlier days when a portion of the membership wished to build some additional church classrooms and another part preferred to commit those resources to a major mission project. In the end the members listened to each other and the Church did both. Those classroom spaces have since been used on a daily basis to house a kindergarten, a daycare center for retarded children and, currently, a preschool program. The mission project selected consisted of moving a frame house into a low income development and establishing a neighborhood center for recreation, daycare and adult education opportunities. This program was operated and staffed by Binkley Church for seven years until the town assumed the responsibility. Where did this spirit go?

In that first congregational meeting on Sunday night, March 22, 1992, there arose a disturbing feeling that those who led the movement in favor of licensure were well organized and had little patience for the unacceptable, antiquated Biblical interpretations of others. This perception was heightened on March 24th, the first night that small groups met. Some of these groups had rational discussions while in others some over zealous persons interrupted anyone who spoke against licensure, conducting themselves as if those who talked the most and longest won the debate. The framework of mutual respect and individual tolerance publicly revealed the first signs of collapse. Perhaps, indeed, the gap had become too wide to bridge.

As new members join Binkley Church and families are leaving, that gap is constantly widening. However, there are many members who remain in a quandary. They cannot accept what has happened, yet know not where else to go. Some of them are simply withdrawing from active participation in the Church which has been a way of life for them, waiting to see if time can heal, hoping that new church leadership can some how restore that sense of community that once was Binkley Church and has now been lost to them. Meanwhile, the character of the Church is slowly but subtly changing.

With the probable ordination request of a gay man on the horizon, with a gay union already suggested as likely by Blevins and urged on the Diaconate for thought earlier this year, with the Church now led by a specially appointed Diaconate committee and committed to the continued study of "responsible Christian sexuality," and with an anticipated policy statement to replace the "preface" supporting these positions, the future direction of this church already seems to have been secured by that 27% of the resident members and their leaders.

In accomplishing this turnabout, the leadership of Binkley Church exhibited another

form of the same political take-over mentality which has been so recently demonstrated by the fundamentalists in the Southern Baptist Convention, only they executed their coup from the other end of the theological spectrum. However, this segment of the membership has only captured a name, and a place and is assembling additional adherents to support its position. But at what cost, for they have lost what was Binkley Baptist Church! The tradition which they so often claim to be following no longer exists there for they have broken faith with that unwritten covenant of mutual support and respect which helped to sustain Binkley during difficult times as it collectively sought to do God's Will. They have not only failed to change the minds and beliefs of the majority of its members, or, for that matter, of even determining what the majority of its members actually think; but they have also created an atmosphere of benevolent intolerance as well as a crisis in leadership credibility which many have found unacceptable. If they retain their control of Binkley Church, it will be simply because they have driven so many others away.

Personal theological or philosophical beliefs, especially those held for most of one's life, cannot be legislated away any more than individual opinions can be made uniformly acceptable by mere litigation. If education is determined by proponents of an idea to be the best means by which they can sway contrary opinion, then the timetable in which to accomplish this has to be set by those whose beliefs they seek to change, in order to be effective, and the environment under which this is to be accomplished has to be determined by those who are to be "educated." The time allowed by the leadership for any philosophical change to take place is a measure of the sense of community over the sense of politics which is guiding the initiatives of those in charge. Treating an issue as a foregone conclusion simply reveals a remarkable disrespect for the beliefs of others and a patronizing attitude that only serves to further alienate persons of differing opinions.

It is when the opinions of one person can no longer be accepted or respected by another that intolerance becomes a factor. It is when one person's "cause" commands a greater commitment than the general well being of the "community" that the political process eclipses the welfare of the whole. And, this is precisely the tragedy which has struck at the heart and soul of what was the Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church.

As this new church strikes out in those new directions which it is actively seeking, it should consider selecting for itself a new name as well, for the old name no longer fits the convictions of the new. To tread upon the old does both the old and the new a great injustice.

Binkley's Experience As Instructive To Others?

Churches throughout the Baptist fellowship all over our nation are going to be faced in the coming years with some aspect of the confrontation between homosexuality and the church, regardless of how they may view the issue. A spinoff of the homosexuality issue is currently engaging our North Carolina Baptist leadership as it continues to reflect upon the full scope and meaning of local church autonomy as opposed to the affirmation of certain basic ideals of Christianity which many Baptists feel cannot be subject to negotiation. Attempts at a reconciliation of positions on this separate issue

may ultimately prove to be as divisive as the relationship of spirituality and homosexuality within the church.

Perhaps what has been experienced at Binkley Baptist Church can serve instructively for other churches. The ideas below are offered in that spirit to individual church members everywhere, for in these areas we at Binkley have, indeed, failed ourselves.

1. Question without hesitation what you do not understand in the decisions taken by your church leaders. There is no such thing as a stupid question! And, if you are belittled, embarrassed, or ignored for asking your question, then you have just experienced one of the first warning signs that something is happening around you to which you are not privy. And, you should be!
2. Always respect the beliefs and principles of others, but beware of persons who do not reciprocate. Reasonable people may reasonably differ, agree to disagree; but intolerance for your beliefs signals the existence of a political agenda which may be inimical to your interests. Strive to be clear in your own mind as to the difference between those policies you can negotiate in a spirit of compromise and those principles you cannot reject.
3. Be absolutely sure of your commitment in your own mind to a categorical position on an issue for which you can accept no compromise. Be completely certain that the division or even dissolution of your church or organization, along with all of its attendant sadness and pain, is worth the cost of pursuing that issue to its ultimate conclusion at that particular time and in that particular place. Be sure that everyone else is also aware of this eventuality.
4. Demand that your leaders represent your point of view on an issue. They are elected by you, after all, and are obligated to represent you and your views in their deliberations as well as their own. Demand an accounting. Do not be put off by generalities and vague explanations. Of course, after all is said and done, you may find yourself in a minority among your peers. But, at least they will have *been* your peers in the decision making process and your relationship with them can remain unimpaired.
5. If you are interested, attend the meetings of your Church Council or Diaconate when they are discussing an issue with which you are especially concerned. Maybe you cannot participate in the discussion, but you can contribute your thoughts and ideas to Board or Council members before their next meeting.
6. Remain involved in the life of your church and active in its ministry. Contribute to some phase of your church's activities or programs. By staying on the periphery, being content with hearing a Sunday sermon and singing a hymn or two, you will never know what is going on within the church organization. One never knows how much one would miss one's church if it were not there, until, suddenly, one finds that, somehow, it no longer exists for them anymore. By then, it is simply too late.

APPENDIX

QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS THAT HAVE BEEN CONSIDERED RELEVANT IN THE DEACONS' CONSIDERATION OF JOHN BLEVINS' REQUEST FOR LICENSURE

Biblical

- The question of whether the Bible can accurately be interpreted literally, or in terms of its, immediate and obvious meaning, or whether it can only be understood first in terms of its own cultural context, and then applied to our time and place.
- The question of whether changing understandings of the Bible through the church's history show that we might accept homosexuality and still claim to take the Bible seriously
- The implication of creation narratives and biblical teachings about marriage for our normative judgments about homosexual behavior
- The moral implication of biblical passages which condemn or appear to condemn homosexual practice
- Consideration of the social and cultural content out of which biblical writers speak about homosexuality per se and its implication for how we interpret or understand what they are speaking for and against -- that is, are they condemning the kind of homosexual expression we are considering?
- The question, which to some extent requires an argument from silence, as to whether Jesus would accept or condemn homosexual behavior
- The question of how we translate the biblical message of love into modern terms
- The question of whether it is relevant that the Bible neither presumes nor addresses homosexual orientation
- The question of whether approving of homosexuality is a singular case of selectively choosing what portions of the Bible we will obey

Theological/Ethical

- The question of whether persons who are sinners can engage in discerning what is morally appropriate or inappropriate for persons who claim to be Christian, and whether it is appropriate to Condemn certain behaviors
- The question of whether it is appropriate for Christians to judge or condemn persons whose behavior violates agreed upon standards
- The question of whether homosexuality ought to be considered a sin
 - (a) so that it makes sense, subsequently, to talk about how we treat sinners in the church
 - (b) so that it makes sense to ask whether being a sinner is the same as embracing and affirming an activity considered sinful
- The question of whether homosexuality ought to be celebrated as an appropriate alternative for persons so oriented, with the affirmation that homosexual relationships allow appropriate, mutually affirming behavior that is life-affirming and glorifies God
- The question of whether, despite doubts about fully affirming homosexuality, the best option is to nurture healthy relationships in cases where homosexual orientation leaves persons with no other

alternatives except celibacy

-The question of whether it is morally appropriate to demand celibacy as an appropriate expression of Christian discipline, even if it denies gay and lesbian persons the kind of intimate relationships that heterosexual persons are allowed to experience

-The question of whether homosexuality is sinful if it is not harmful as long as it is practiced in otherwise responsible ways and within Christian guidelines for relationships

-The question of whether love, acceptance, and inclusivity take priority over all other sources for moral guidance -- and whether love and disapproval are mutually exclusive ways of expressing faithfulness

-The question of whether carrying out our responsibility to love and accept people precludes disapproval of behaviors judged to be immoral

-The appropriateness of sexual activity outside a relationship publicly professed to be longterm and monogamous

-The question of whether it is helpful to make separate judgments on homosexual orientation and on homosexual behavior

-The appropriateness of practicing (acting out) a homosexual orientation -- on the assumption that an action is sinful only if it is willfully done

-The challenge posed by the difficulty of upholding standards of behavior and still being pastoral, loving, and accepting of persons who violate those standards

-The question of whether all "naturally occurring" proclivities are good merely because they are natural, given inborn, or chosen -- that is, does natural = good?

-The question of whether our willingness to approve of homosexuality might be an accommodation to social and cultural pressures, but without sufficient theological and biblical warrant

-The question of whether the "ideal" of monogamous relationships can always prevail as a moral norm in light of the complex realities associated with being homosexual

-The question of whether the church can and ought to help undo cruel and unjust treatment of homosexuals by exhibiting its own acceptance of gay and lesbian people -- including the question of whether we ought to oppose laws that criminalize homosexual behavior

-The question of whether one can be homosexual and Christian

-The question of whether homosexual behavior is appropriate/acceptable for persons who are Christian

-The question of whether we can hold homosexuals accountable to moral norms like marriage when society refuses to sanction such arrangements

Scientific

-The question of what causes homosexuality and whether there is a sufficient basis for us to make any definitive claims at this point -- is there sufficient warrant to claim that people are born or created homosexual (i. e. homosexuality is like left-handedness)?

-The question of whether homosexuality is too complex to speak of a single cause

-The question of whether homosexual orientation can and sometimes should be changed

Ecclesiastical

- The question of whether clergy ought to be held to higher standards or higher levels of adherence to moral standards than non-clergy
- The question of whether our understanding that all Christians are ministers serves as a basis for consistent moral codes for all Christians
- The question of whether homosexuality is an appropriate role model to be exhibited by a church leader
- The question of whether John Blevins has a long enough history with Binkley to warrant licensure by this congregation
- The question of whether licensure makes no moral statement, but only acknowledges one's qualifications and call to ministry
- The question of whether we have any basis to deny licensure to a qualified candidate when we have already accepted him or her into church membership -- including the acknowledgement that we already openly accept homosexuals as church members, without suggestion that they are acting in ways inappropriate to their faith

Pastoral

- What kind of impact would rejecting John's request have on him?
- What would be the impact of rejecting John Blevins' request on gay and lesbian members of the congregation?
- The question of whether the pain and suffering caused to gay and lesbian people warrants our accepting John's request
- The question of whether the impact of being on the "losing" side of the vote will have significant negative impact on the congregation, and how that ought to affect our decisions and process
- The challenge of how to respond to persons who threaten to or intend to leave the church if it votes in favor of John's licensure
- The question of whether the general absence of social support for healthy homosexual lifestyles is sufficient reason to discourage or disapprove of homosexual practice in our current cultural context

Process

- The question of whether the congregation would be better served by considering the issue of homosexuality separately from John's request before moving to a vote on his licensure
- The question of whether we have had enough time to adequately consider issues like those posed in this list
- The question of whether the congregation will have as much time and opportunity to consider the issue as the deacons have had
- The question of whether our discomfort with issues of sexuality in general has precluded careful study and honest discussion of the issues
- The question of whether it is appropriate, to make explicit statements about our Christian perspectives on homosexuality and on sexuality in general in the context of considering John Blevin's request
- The question of whether it would be appropriate to change the way the deacons want to put the

issue before the congregation

- The question of whether addressing the general principle of homosexuality and the church would divert attention from John's request for licensure

- The question of whether deacons' positions should be allowed to bias the congregation's thinking and vote

- The question of whether the deacons themselves had sufficient discussion prior to their vote

Implications of Yes and No votes on the Deacon's Recommendation

- The question of whether we ought to recommend and or vote on a motion that leaves our position on homosexuality unstated allowing others to interpret the implications

- The question of whether one's position on homosexuality can be separated from the motion we have recommended, or whether it is appropriate to consider ones position on homosexuality irrelevant to whether we recommend that John ought to be licensed

- The question of whether licensing a person is an endorsement of his or her lifestyle



